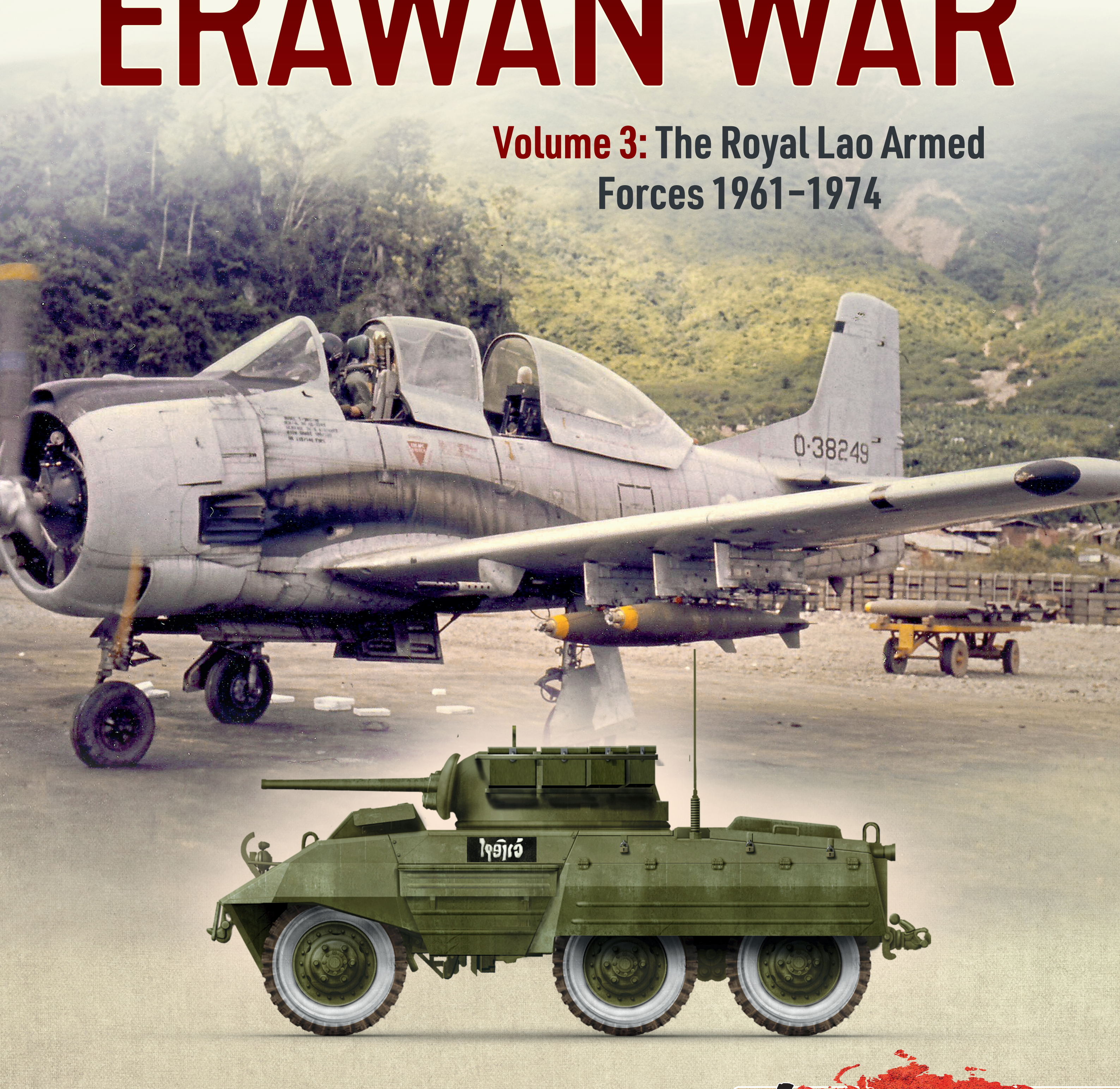
No.37

FULL COLOUR THROUGHOUT

THE ERAWAN WAR

Volume 3: The Royal Lao Armed Forces 1961–1974



ASIA@WAR SERIES

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We always welcome receiving book proposals from prospective authors.

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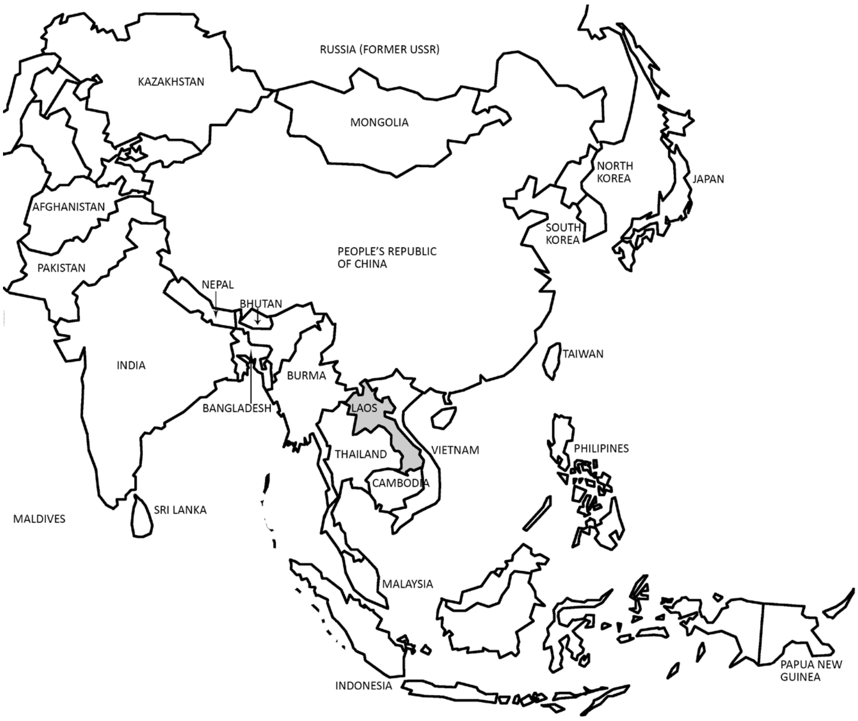
RUSSIA (FORMER USSR)
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MALDIVES
MALAYSIA
PAPUA NEW GUINEA
INDONESIA

Note: In order to simplify the use of this book, all names, locations and geographic designations are as provided in *The Times World Atlas*, or other traditionally accepted major sources of reference, as of the time of described events.

ABBREVIATIONS

AD	*Auto-défense*, a French-era militia program resurrected by the RLG
ADC	*Auto-defense d’choc*, militia units supported by the CIA and FAR
ANL	*Armée Nationale Laotiènne*, or Lao National Army
AOC	Air Operations Centre
BAP	*Base Aéroporté Parachutistes*, or Airborne Training Centre
BC	*Bataillon Commando*, or Commando Battalion
BCL	*Bataillon de Chasseurs Laotiens*, or Lao Light Infantry Battalion
BI	*Bataillon d’Infanterie*, or Infantry Battalion
BIL	*Bataillon d’Infanterie Laotienne*, or Lao Infantry Battalion
BLL	*Bataillon Legers Laotiens*, or Lao Light Battalion
BP	*Bataillon de Parachutistes*, or Parachute Battalion
BPL	*Bataillon de Parachutistes Laotiens*, or Lao Parachute Battalion
BR	*Bataillon Régionaux*, or Regional Battalion
BS	*Bataillon Spécial*, or Special Battalion
BV	*Bataillon Voluntaire*, or Volunteer Battalion
CATC	Combat Arms Training Centre
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief Pacific
COC	Combined Operations Centre
DepChief	Deputy Chief, Joint US Military Assistance Group Thailand
DNC	Directorate of National Coordination
ECCOIL	Eastern Construction Company in Laos
EFL	*Escadrille Fluviale Lao*, or Lao River Squadron
EVFL	*Escadrille de Vedettes Fluviales Lao*, or Lao River Speedboat Squadron
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FAL	*Forces Armées du Laos*, or Lao Armed Forces
FAN	*Forces Armées Neutralistes*, or Neutralist Armed Forces
FAR	*Forces Armées Royales*, or Royal Armed Forces
FTT	Field Training Team
GM	*Groupement Mobile*, a regiment consisting of three battalions
GMS	*Groupement Mobile Speciale*, or Special Regiment
GT	*Groupement Tactique*, or Tactical Group
JOC	Joint Operations Centre
JUSMAG	Joint US Military Assistance Group Thailand
LAAF	Lao Army Air Force
MAAG	Military Assistance and Advisory Group
MR	Military Region
MRL	*Marine Royal Lao*, or Royal Lao Navy
NCO	Non-commissioned officer
OCS	Officer Candidate School
OD	Operational Detachment
PARU	Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit, a Thai police commando formation
PDJ	*Plaine des Jarres*, or Plain of Jars
PEO	Programs Evaluation Office
PGNU	Provisional Government of National Union
RI	*Régiment d’infanterie*, or Infantry Regiment
RLAF	Royal Lao Air Force
RLG	Royal Lao Government
RLGAF	Royal Laotian Government Air Force
RO	Requirements Office
RTA	Royal Thai Army
RTAFB	Royal Thai Air Force Base
RTG	Royal Thai Government
SPECOM	Special Commando
TOE	Table of Organization and Equipment
USAF	US Air Force
USASFT	US Army Special Forces Thailand
USSF	US Army Special Forces
VNAF	South Vietnamese Air Force

A Note on Spelling

Lao words in this volume have generally been transliterated to the Roman script using romanisation systems that were in use prior to 1975. Thus, the word for ‘small town’ is spelled *moung* rather than the more current transliteration of *meuang*. This was done in an attempt to better conform with US documentation published during the war years.

Similarly, Lao first names and surnames use spellings most commonly seen prior to 1975.

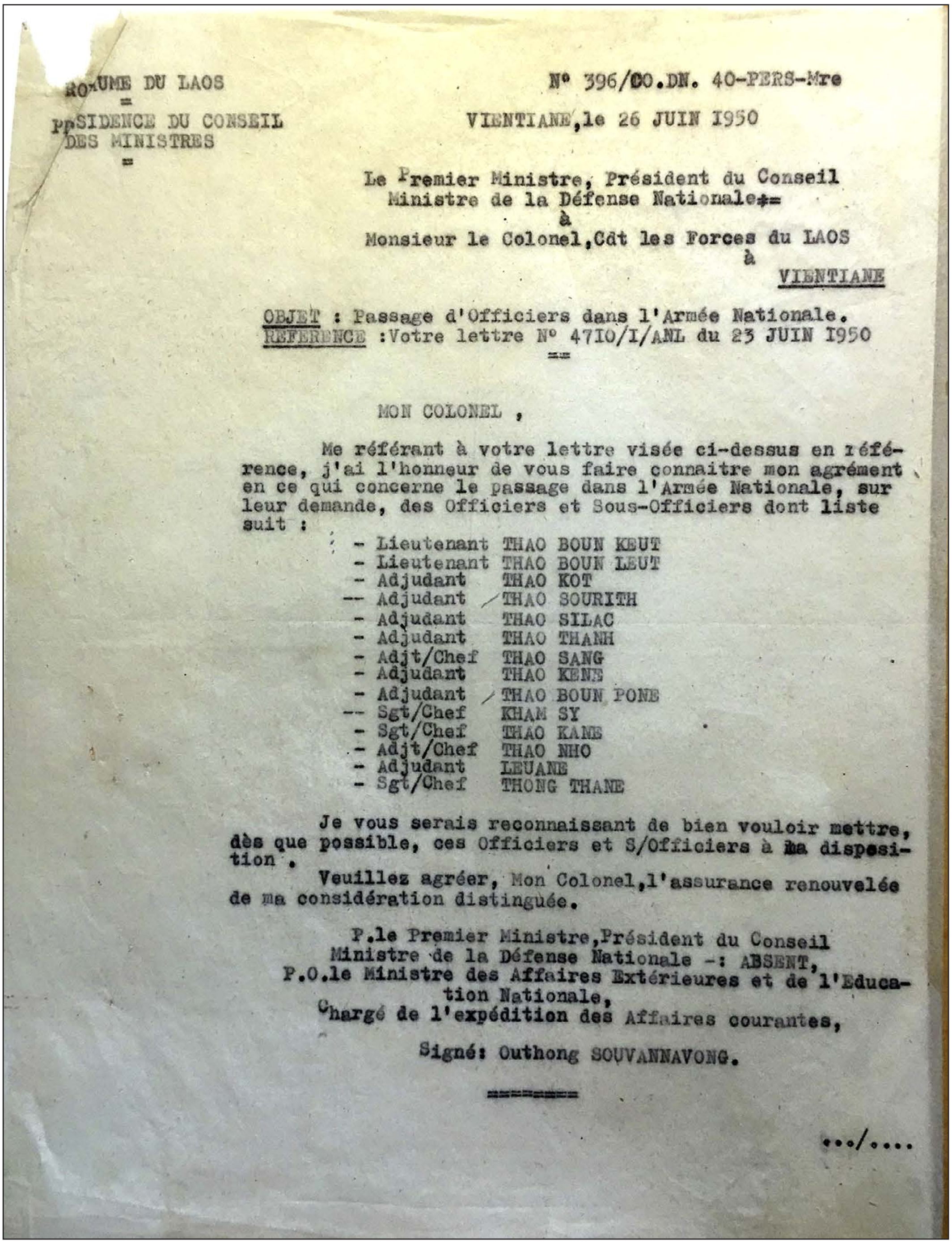
1

BIRTH OF AN ARMY

Throughout the height of the Second Indochina War, it was CIA-sponsored irregular forces that dominated fighting on behalf of the Royal Lao Government (RLG). This was not always the case, however. For a full decade prior to the rise of the CIA’s guerrillas, the RLG’s own military waged war against a communist foe.

The story of the Royalist armed forces traces back to the immediate aftermath of the Second World War in November 1945. The French at the time began to arm their Lao subjects, and within two years had enough signed up to create six Lao Light Infantry Battalions (*Bataillon de Chasseurs Laotiens*, or BCL) in the colonial French Union Army. As no Lao were yet qualified, the BCL cadre were comprised of French officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs).

Two years later, a 1949 Franco-Lao agreement paved the way for eventual Lao independence. As part of this, the RLG was granted the right to raise a Lao National Army (*Armée Nationale Laotiènne*, or ANL). The first ANL commander, Lieutenant Colonel Sounthone



ROxUME DU LAOS
=
PpSIDENCE DU CONSEIL
DES MINISTRES
=

N° 396/CO.DN. 40-PERS-Mre

VIENTIANE,le 26 JUIN 1950

Le Premier Ministre, Président du Conseil
Ministre de la Défense Nationale
à
Monsieur le Colonel,Cdt les Forces du LAOS
à
VIENTIANE

OBJET : Passage d'Officiers dans l'Armée Nationale.
REFERENCE :Votre lettre N° 4710/I/ANL du 23 JUIN 1950

MON COLONEL ,

Me référant à votre lettre visée ci-dessus en référence, j'ai l'honneur de vous faire connaitre mon agrément en ce qui concerne le passage dans l'Armée Nationale, sur leur demande, des Officiers et Sous-Officiers dont liste suit :

- Lieutenant THAO BOUN KEUT
- Lieutenant THAO BOUN LEUT
- Adjudant THAO KOT
- Adjudant THAO SOURITH
- Adjudant THAO SILAC
- Adjudant THAO THANH
- Adjt/Chef THAO SANG
- Adjudant THAO KENE
- Adjudant THAO BOUN PONE
- Sgt/Chef KHAM SY
- Sgt/Chef THAO KANE
- Adjt/Chef THAO NHO
- Adjudant LEUANE
- Sgt/Chef THONG THANE

Je vous serais reconnaissant de bien vouloir mettre, dès que possible, ces Officiers et S/Officiers à ma disposition .

Veuillez agréer, Mon Colonel,l'assurance renouvelée de ma considération distinguée.

P.le Premier Ministre,Président du Conseil
Ministre de la Défense Nationale -: ABSENT,
P.O.le Ministre des Affaires Extérieures et de l'Education Nationale,
Chargé de l'expédition des Affaires courantes,

Signé: Outhong SOUVANNAVONG.

=========

.../....

A 26 June 1950 memorandum from Outhong Souvannavong, the RLG's Minister of Foreign Affairs, listing Lao officers and NCOs available for assignment in the ANL. The two lieutenants – Bounleut [Sanichanh] and his brother-in-law Bounkeut [Mekdara] – had been pro-French guerrillas in the Savannakhet vicinity since the Second World War. The other 12 were from the first OCS class at Dong Hene in 1949. That initial class was just four months long rather than a full year; as a result, graduates did not yet emerge as officers but were given lesser interim ranks as *adjudant-chef* (chief warrant officer), *adjudant* (warrant officer) or *sergent-chef* (sergeant first class). Seven of the 14 persons on this list ultimately became generals. (French Army Archives, SHD Vincennes, Folder 10 H 5632)

Pathammavong, was a former Savannakhet Province governor with civil service experience but no military background.

At the time of the ANL's establishment, Laos had no in-country military schools. As an interim measure, in 1949 an initial batch of four officer candidates went to the French-run Khmer Military Academy in Phnom Penh. Not until later that same year did France create an ANL Officer Candidate School (OCS) in Dong Hene, 60 kilometres northeast of Savannakhet, and an NCO school in the southern town of Paksong (soon shifted to Dong Hene as well). Classes in both schools were conducted by French instructors.

Concurrently, the French were helping the ANL raise their own infantry. By the end of 1950, the ANL inaugurated a pair of 600-man Lao Infantry Battalions (*Bataillon d'Infanterie Laotienne*, or BIL). The cadre in both battalions were French officers and NGOs, which in reality made the BILs little different from the BCLs under the French Union Army.

By the close of 1951, the ANL had reached 5,091 combatants. As of May 1952, it had nearly doubled to 9,650 men, with plans to double again in size during 1953. To accomplish this, there was a partial mobilisation of Lao males in June 1953. Some of the most promising were sent to a Reserve Officer School built in Pakse, which graduated its first three-month cycle in September 1953.

During this period, the ANL of the RLG and Lao units of the French Union Army were ostensibly separate. In reality, lines were blurred as both were led and controlled by the French. The one major difference was in deployment: the BILs were mostly stationed in towns, while the BCLs were assigned one per province (and further divided into one company for each district).

In August 1953, the first Lao Light Battalions (*Bataillon Legers Laotiens*, or BLL) were inaugurated within the ANL. They were somewhat smaller than the BILs, consisting of only 200–300 men with no heavy weapons. Significantly, the BLLs were intended to be comprised solely of Lao, to include officer and NCO slots.

Over the ensuing year, the ANL saw further incremental gains as it partook in several intense campaigns to beat back communist Viet Minh and Pathet Lao incursions. Besides infantry, the ANL roster now included an array of support units, some armour and artillery, a myriad of militia formations, the embryo of a riverine force, and plans for an aviation branch. The ANL also had a single elite unit, the 1st Lao Parachute Battalion (*1 Bataillon de Parachutistes Laotiens*, or 1 BPL). Formed in October 1951 and based at Chinaimo, a military camp on the southeast outskirts of Vientiane, this battalion was crushed in 1953 fighting, reconstituted, then saw a quarter of its men desert in May

ANL lieutenants on the Saint-Cyr orientation tour in 1953. Sourith Don Sasorith (centre) wears a US olive drab wool field jacket ('Ike Jacket'); two on the left use the US Army green service uniform. (Photo courtesy Ousa and Soui Sananikone)

ANL Lieutenants Phasouk Somly Rasphakdi, Amkha Soukhavong, Bounleut Sanichanh, and Oudone Sananikone during an orientation tour of the Saint-Cyr Military Academy in France during March–May 1953. The French outfitted these early ANL officers in surplus US Army attire, including the green trench coats seen here. (Photo courtesy Ousa and Soui Sananikone)

1954. In July, they shipped 94 fresh recruits down to Saigon for two weeks of jump training; this allowed the battalion to be rebuilt once more at Seno Airbase near Savannakhet. On 2–4 August 1954, two of its companies conducted the last airborne operation of the French Indochina War when they jumped south of the Mu Gia Pass.

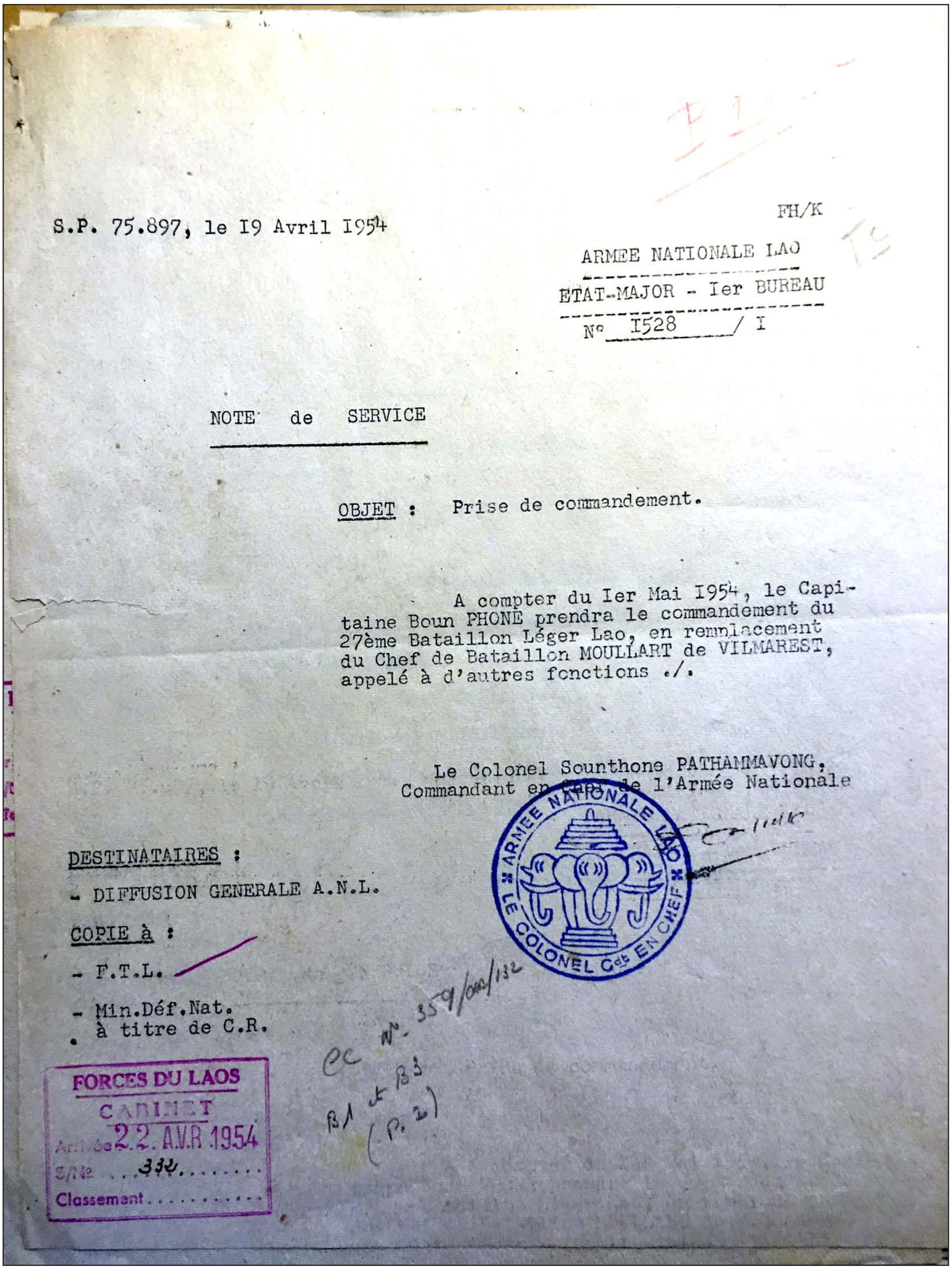
Two days later, the Geneva Agreement ushered in a ceasefire that marked the end to French colonial control in Indochina. While the French retained a token presence of combat troops at Seno (plus a sizable training contingent), the ANL now had primary responsibility for defence of the kingdom. For this, the core of its ground forces was comprised of the six existing BILs, seven BLLs, and the airborne battalion. The ANL was also given control over the BCLs from the former French Union Army; six of these were redesignated as BILs during 1955.

To fill the leadership gap left by the departing French, a young crop of Lao officers stepped forward. Major Phoumi Nosavan, an ANL lieutenant commissioned in October 1950, was named the ANL chief of staff at the tender age of 34. This placed Phoumi directly under Colonel Sounthone in the ANL chain of command. Four other majors on 25 August 1954 were selected to head newly created military regions (MRs):

- Military Region 1: consisting of the four north and northwestern provinces and headquartered in Luang Prabang. Commanded by Major Ouane Rathikoun, 36, who was close to the royal family.
- Military Region 2: consisting of the four north-eastern provinces and headquartered at Chinaimo. Led by Major Amkha Soukhavong. Like Sing, he was one of the original Lao NCOs in the French Union Army.
- Military Region 3: located in the northern Lao panhandle and headquartered in Savannakhet. Headed by Major Bounleut Sanichanh, a Thakhek native and close ally of Phoumi Nosavan.
- Military Region 4: the six southernmost provinces, headquartered in Pakse. Led by Major Sing Rattanasamy, one of the first Lao NCOs in the French Union Army and the first Lao to command a BIL.

By the end of the following year, there was a partial rotation of MR commanders. While Ouane remained in charge of MR 1, Major Amkha shifted down to Pakse to head MR 4 while Major Sing moved up to take over MR 3. In as the new MR 2 commander was Major Sang Kittarath, a French favourite. As MR commanders, they were given administrative control over all battalions stationed in their region. By 1956, technical and support units were also placed under the MR commanders, leaving little for the ANL General Staff in Vientiane to control.

During this same period, communist Pathet Lao combatants began to put pressure on the RLG. According to the Geneva Agreement, the communists were allowed to regroup for four months in the northern provinces of Sam Neua and Phongsaly



S.P. 75.897, le I9 Avril I954

FH/K

ARMEE NATIONALE LAO
ETAT-MAJOR - Ier BUREAU
N° I528 / I

NOTE de SERVICE

OBJET : Prise de commandement.

A compter du Ier Mai I954, le Capitaine Boun PHONE prendra le commandement du 27ème Bataillon Léger Lao, en remplacement du Chef de Bataillon MOULLART de VILMAREST, appelé à d'autres fonctions ./.

Le Colonel Sounthone PATHAMMAVONG,
Commandant en Chef de l'Armée Nationale

DESTINATAIRES :

- DIFFUSION GENERALE A.N.L.

COPIE à :

- F.T.L.
- Min.Déf.Nat.
  à titre de C.R.

FORCES DU LAOS
CABINET
Arrivée 22. AVR 1954
S/N° 332
Classement

cc N° 359/om/132
B1 et B3
(P.2)

A memorandum dated 19 April 1954 and signed by Colonel Sounthone Pathammavong, commander of the ANL, stating that Captain Bounpone [Marthepharak] will take command of 27 BLL from a French officer. While the BLL ostensibly had Lao cadre from the onset, in some cases French officers were in charge for a transition period. Bounpone in 1971 would become FAR commander. (French Army Archives, SHD Vincennes, Folder 10 H 5632)

(Sam Neua was actually the provincial capital of Houaphanh, but throughout this period the name of the provincial capital and province were commonly conflated). After that, they were obliged to integrate into the RLG. The Pathet Lao reneged on this, however, and instead began to ratchet up pressure in Sam Neua. In response, during June 1955 Major Bounpone Marthepharak was assigned with overseeing the reinforcement of the province with two infantry battalions. Still not enough, the 1 BPL conducted its first post-war airborne operation during July when several planeloads were dropped over three consecutive days into the village of Moung Peun.

During those jumps, most of the planes were piloted by French nationals. Behind the scenes, however, the US was fast supplanting France as the main benefactor of the ANL. In December 1954, in fact, a military assistance group had been established in the US Embassy. Because this was technically not permissible under the Geneva Agreement, the group was given the innocuous title of Programs Evaluation Office (PEO). Within a month, the PEO was channeling the ANL nearly its entire budget.

With PEO funds flowing, the ANL experienced some growth. For one thing, a few of the BLLs were somewhat expanded in size and converted into BIs. For example, BLL 21 at Nambac became BI 21. (By that time, the *Laotienne* in their titles was considered redundant, so the BILs became known simply as BIs and the 1 BPL became 1 BP.) For one thing, starting in 1955 a new formation known as the Volunteer Battalions (*Bataillon Voluntaire*, or BVs) was added to the ANL order of battle. Five of these were made by converting former BLLs (for instance, BLL 26 at Pakse became BV 41); others drew their men from French-era militia units. Each BV was responsible for a single province, whereas the BIs were eligible for nationwide deployment.

Finally, in 1957 the ANL began forming a second airborne battalion – 2 BP – at Vientiane's Wattay Airport. Combined with 1 BP at Seno, both were designated as the ANL's reserve force – with 2 BP responsible for the northern half of the kingdom, 1 BP for the south – and placed under an Airborne Command at Wattay.

With this expanded roster, the PEO began to quietly arrange for the ANL to get overseas training. Some were scheduled to go to the United States, though only a fraction ever actually went. For example, just four out of an authorised 16 junior officers departed for advanced infantry leadership training at Fort Benning in 1959.

Other Lao attended training in Southeast Asia, especially the Philippines. Beginning in 1958, two classes of trainees received US-funded Scout Ranger instruction at Fort McKinley, Manila; 23 more were scheduled for infantry training during 1959. In addition, select officers were flown to the Philippines for counterinsurgency seminars. Manila also offered advisors for use in Laos. Starting in January 1959, PEO contracted with the Manila-based Eastern Construction Company (known by the acronym ECCOIL) to attach

ANL troops parade down Fa Ngum Road near the Mekong waterfront, 1955. They wear a variant of the French M1947 khaki tropical uniform along with the US Second World War service shoe and leggings. Officers carry the Thompson sub machine gun. (Photo courtesy Martin Rathie Collection/Khaosan Pathet Lao Photo Archive Conservation Project)

Members of the first Hotfoot increment at Luang Prabang, 1959. In keeping with their civilian cover, all are devoid of rank and insignia – though three hold US Army-issued sun helmets. The FAL airborne non-commissioned officer on the left wears the French-era badge for the BPL below his right pocket. (Photo courtesy George Morton)

Filipino technicians directly to ANL technical branches. By mid-year, 103 more ECCOIL personnel were hired to replace French instructors assigned to aviation, riverine, and technical units.

Thailand, too, began extending assistance. In 1957, the PEO discretely dispatched ANL logistical personnel for instruction in Thailand. In mid-1958, they arranged for a company of paratroopers to go through the Royal Thai Army (RTA) airborne course at Lopburi. In September 1959, an agreement was reached for the RTA to provide an eight-week retraining course at Lopburi for some 1,400 Lao paratroopers in guerrilla and anti-guerrilla tactics. This became known as Project Erawan, taking its name from the mythical three-headed elephant featured on the RLG flag.

The PEO also looked to the Republic of Vietnam and to Malaya for assistance. In late 1958, 49 Lao students were scheduled for a variety of courses in Vietnam, and 100 ANL technical personnel were to tour South Vietnamese military facilities. Neither program, however, came to fruition. Slightly better results were had in Malaya, where two junior officers from 2 BP in January 1960 were sent for instruction at the British-run Jungle Warfare School.

All of this was complemented by in-country training planned by the PEO. In January 1959, the office requested a contingent of US Army Special Forces (USSF) instructors; like the rest of the PEO, these Green Berets were to drop from the army rolls and enter Laos as civilians in order to comply with the Geneva Agreement. Four months later, agreement was reached whereby the French military training mission and the USSF instructors – the latter going by the codename Hotfoot – would jointly administer ANL training centres in Luang Prabang, Pakse, Savannakhet, and Vientiane; as per the agreement, the Americans would give technical instruction, while the French would focus on tactics.

By July, the Hotfoot contingent reached Laos. No sooner than they arrived, however, training was put on hold. The reason was because the ANL, rechristened that month as the Lao Armed Forces (*Forces Armées du Laos*, or FAL), was confronting a resurgent Pathet Lao. The background to this dated back two years, when the RLG – in an attempt to accommodate the Pathet Lao into a coalition government – gave them two ministerial posts in an enlarged cabinet and agreed to supplemental legislative elections set for May 1958. When those polls took place, most leftist candidates won a slim majority – largely because the rightists could not agree on a single slate and ended up splitting their votes.

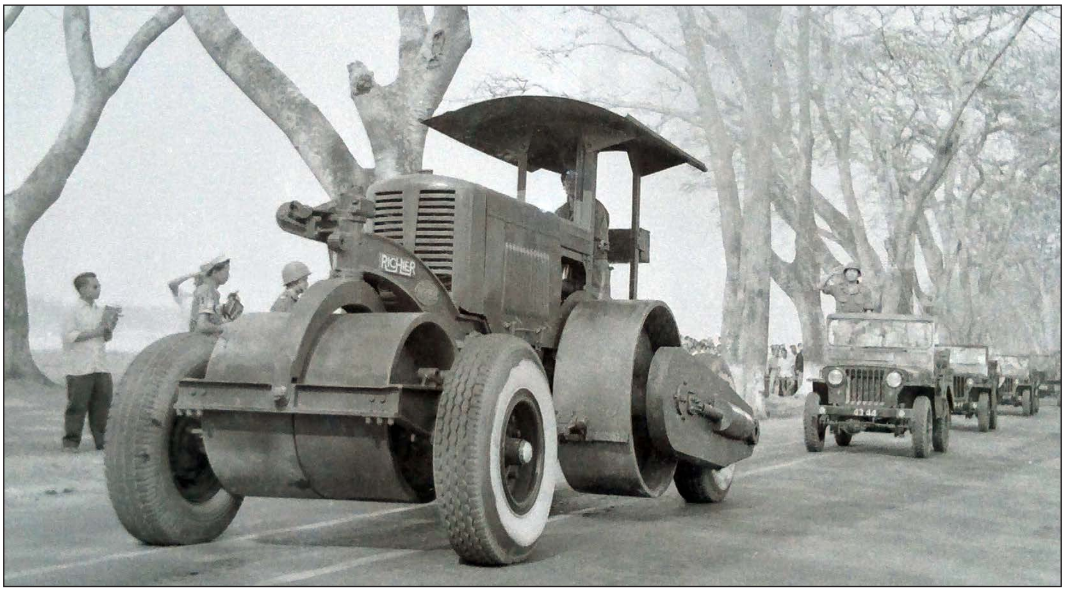
All of which sparked a major backlash among the rightists in the RLG. In January 1959, the conservative Prime Minister Phoui Sananikone pressed his advantage by successfully appealing to the National Assembly for a year of rule-by-decree. Uncomfortable with the RLG's rightward tilt, most of the Pathet Lao assemblymen fled the capital for safety in Sam Neua.

At the same time, the RLG was insisting that the Pathet Lao integrate its forces into the ANL. After prolonged negotiations, the Pathet Lao assembled two battalions – totalling 1,501 combatants – on the Plain of Jars (*Plaine des Jarres*, or PDJ) in Xieng Khouang Province. With one battalion subsequently sent to Luang Prabang and the other remaining on the PDJ, an integration ceremony was set for May 1959. To officiate this, the newly-promoted ANL chief of staff, Brigadier General Ouane Rathikoun, flew up to the plain.

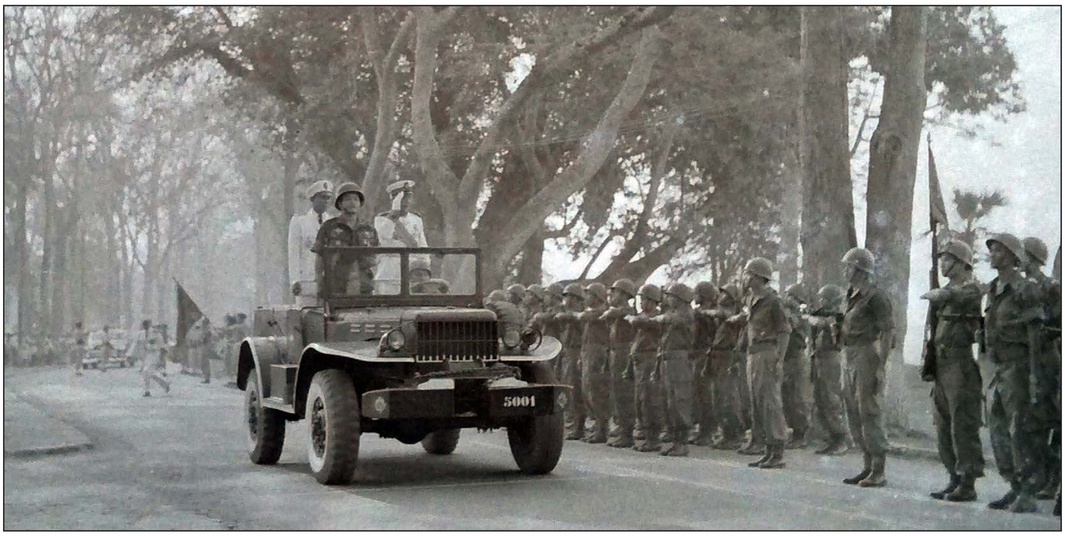
To Oune's surprise and chagrin, the Pathet Lao suddenly had a change of heart and turned him back at gunpoint. ANL saber-rattling ensued, at which point both Pathet Lao contingents relented and vowed to integrate later in May. The Luang Prabang battalion made good on this pledge; the PDJ battalion, however, fled its encampment at the last moment. The ANL gave an attempt at pursuit, including a parachute drop by one company from 2 BP, but the rebellious Pathet Lao battalion succeeded in reaching the North Vietnamese border.

The flight of the Pathet Lao battalion had a ripple effect across the RLG. First, MR 2 commander Sang was sacked and replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Khamkhong Bouddavong. (As consolation, the following year Sang was sent to Paris for the French War College.) Second, the Pathet Lao battalion near Luang Prabang began to rethink its integration pledge. After more than 100 members fled their barracks, the remaining 373 members were shipped down to Vientiane, then put on boats destined for MR 4. There they were designated for merger into the FAL's newest battalion, BI 26 in Saravane.

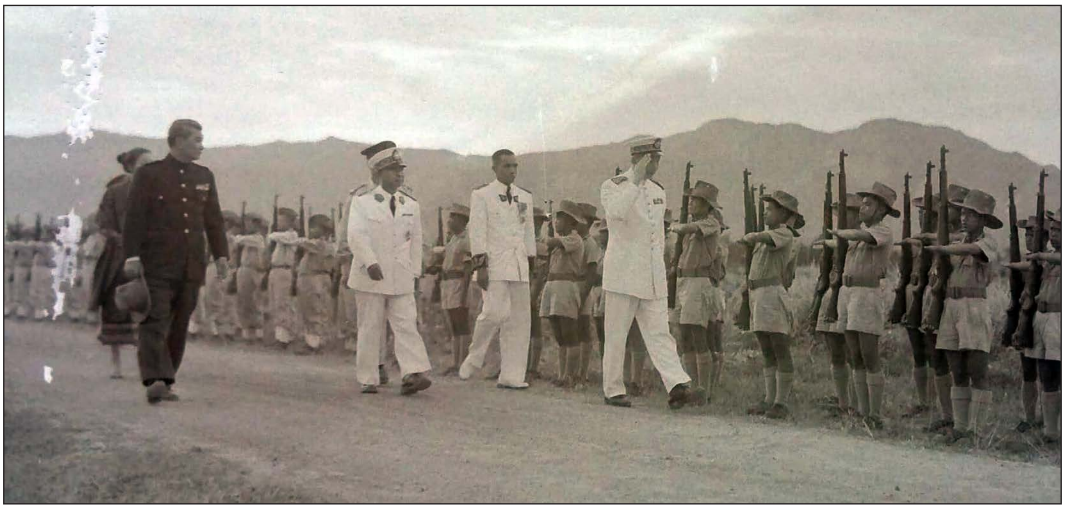
Third, Pathet Lao units training in North Vietnam crossed the border during July 1959 and began staging probes against RLG outposts. Four posts fell, though two were soon retaken. While not



An ANL combat engineer drives a Richier VR5F steamroller (fitted with wheels to assist mobility) down Fa Ngum Road during a military parade, 1955. (Photo courtesy Martin Rathie Collection/Khaosan Pathet Lao Photo Archive Conservation Project)



King Sisavang Vong (saluting) reviews troops from a Dodge command car, 1955. In the rear is Colonel Southone Pathammavong using dress whites with a black tie. Standing in the front seat as parade commander is Captain Sourith Don Sasorith, who had taken over in late 1954 as first Lao to lead the 1 BPL; perhaps not by coincidence, his cousin Katay Don Sasorith, was prime minister at the time. (Photo courtesy Martin Rathie Collection/Khaosan Pathet Lao Photo Archive Conservation Project)



King Sisavang Vong (in white, right), Prime Minister Katay Don Sasorith (in white, third from right), and Prince Boun Oum (in black) review ANL troops in Attopeu, 1955. Half of the troops are outfitted with the French Mle-49 bush hat and French Mle-46 khaki shorts. (Photo courtesy Martin Rathie Collection/Khaosan Pathet Lao Photo Archive Conservation Project) exactly a catastrophic development, Vientiane began overreacting to the fullest. On 28 July, the RLG rounded up 16 Pathet Lao leaders still in the capital and threw them into Phone Kheng prison on the northeast outskirts of town.

On the following morning, the FAL General Staff ordered 2 BP to Sam Neua as reinforcements. The staff also resurrected its dormant *auto-défense* (AD) militia program and called for the establishment of a maquis network in Sam Neua. Finally, Brigadier General Amkha, the newly-promoted FAL deputy commander in chief, was ordered to Sam Neua to orchestrate a border sweep.

For his clearing operation, Amkha was fortunate to have 2 BP. Nearly alone among FAL battalions, 2 BP was a hard and disciplined outfit. Much of its professionalism could be attributed to the battalion's executive officer, Kong Le, an aggressive captain from a peasant background who regularly filled in for his inattentive commander.

From his tent headquarters at the Sam Neua airfield, Kong Le dispatched two airborne companies north toward the border. They were joined by a pair of Filipino advisors, both former captains in the crack Scout Ranger Regiment that were hired though a PEO contract with ECCOIL.

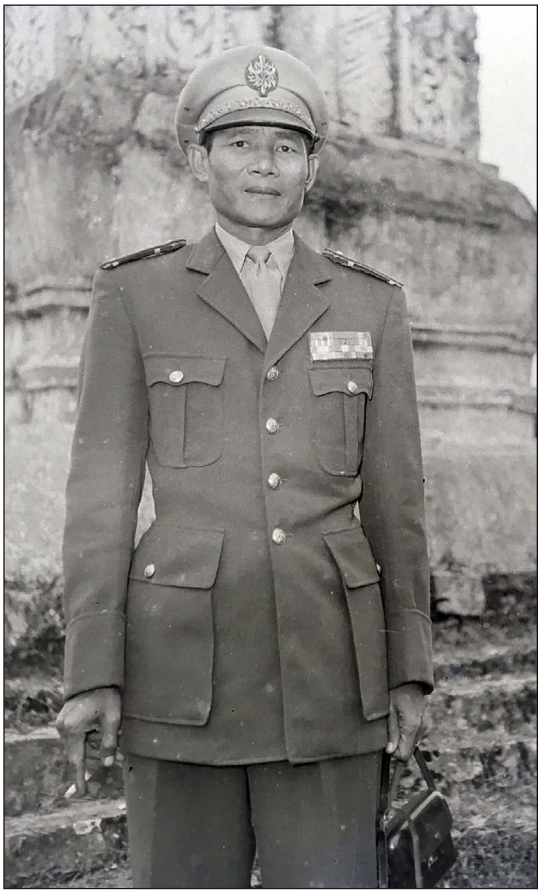
For the next three days, the 2 BP paratroopers experienced no Pathet Lao contact. To detail his findings, Kong Le took a jeep from his runway command post and headed into Sam Neua town to brief Amkha. Upon arrival, however, he found that the provincial capital's flighty military garrison and civilian administration had that morning packed and moved down Route 6 toward Moung Peun.

Furious, Kong Le raised Vientiane on the radio and reported the FAL exodus. The following morning, an Air America C-45 transport landed at Sam Neua with Jack Mathews, one of two CIA officers seconded to the PEO. He was joined at midday by Generals Phoumi and Ouane, both of whom prodded Amkha and the rest of the garrison back to Sam Neua town. Sent as further reinforcements were three companies from BI 4 in Attopeu, and one company from BI 26, the undermanned Saravane-based battalion scheduled to be filled with ex-Pathet Lao.

Once these troops arrived, communist activity in the Sam Neua sector dropped to zero during the first two weeks of August. The following week, however, renewed clashes sent the FAL General Staff into a frenzy, prompting them to dispatch north part of its southern-based reserve, 1 BP. Loaded aboard FAL C-47s at Seno, four dozen paratroopers were dropped on 21 August into Moung Peun. With these fresh troops on the ground, Sam Neua once more grew quiet.

Due to the Sam Neua crisis, the FAL General Staff determined that MR 2 was too large for a single command. Accordingly, they shifted the MR 2 headquarters to Xieng Khouangville and made the region responsible only for Xieng Khouang, Sam Neua, and Borikhane provinces. A new region, MR 5, headquartered at Chinaimo and responsible solely for Vientiane Province, was created under the command of Phoumi Nosavan. Now sporting the double stars of a brigadier general, Phoumi had returned the previous year as the first Lao to attend the *École Supérieure de Guerre*, the French War College.

Meantime, the Hotfoot advisors at long last started training FAL troops by the end of the third quarter. MR commanders were obliged to rotate a quarter of each battalion in their region through their respective centres, with each cycle set to last seven weeks. In November, a fifth training site was added when Hotfoot and the French military mission opened a centre at Phongsavanh, the largest village on the PDJ in MR 2.



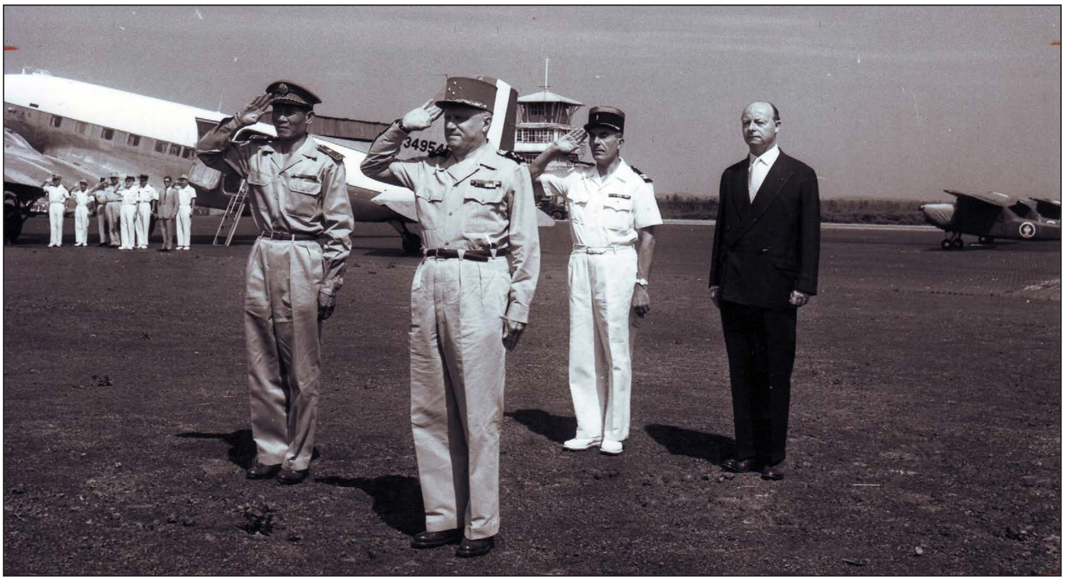
ANL commander Sounthone Pathammavong circa 1956 using a copy of the US Army green service jacket with the four vertical buttons replaced with those featuring the ANL trident/cakra device. Sounthone has added a khaki tie to the ANL's light khaki tropical shirt worn under the jacket. The Lao military's dress code was in flux during this period: by 1960 the khaki tie had been replaced by a black tie, and the service jacket changed from green to khaki tan. (Photo courtesy Martin Rathie Collection/Khaosan Pathet Lao Photo Archive Conservation Project)

Hotfoot soon added two more training sites in MR 5, these done without any French participation. The first was at a new camp taking shape 22 kilometres outside the capital, intended as a 300-man complex to include an officer school, battalion commander school, and company commander school. The second was 17 kilometres outside the capital, this one intended as a psychological warfare and ranger training school.

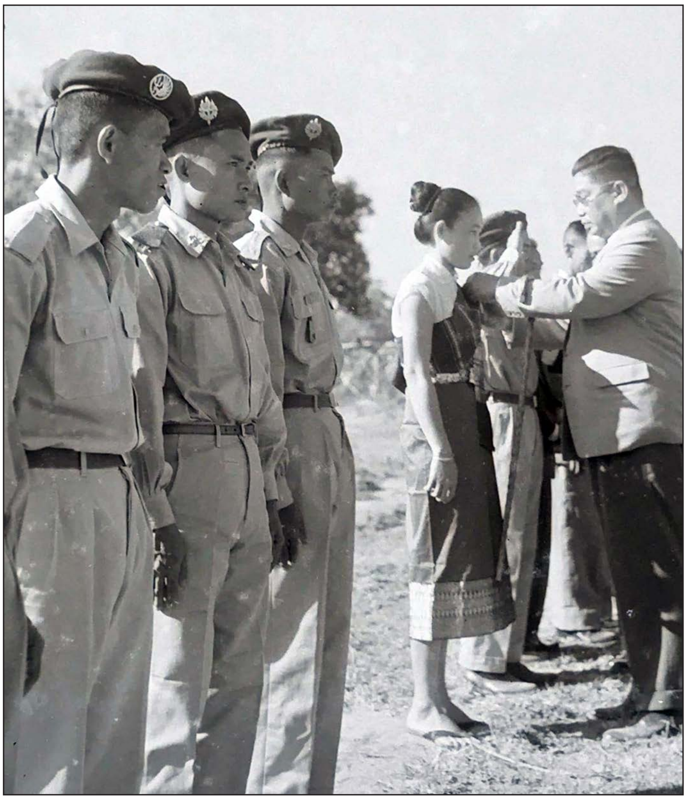
Also during this period, Hotfoot completed a detailed assessment of the FAL. They found the 12 BIs standardised at 600 men. The 12 BVs, by contrast, averaged five 100-man companies and a 42-man headquarters.

Supporting these battalions were artillery and armour. The 1st Field Artillery Group, headquartered at Savannakhet had a mix of 105mm howitzers and 4.2-inch mortars divided among three batteries. The Armoured Force, with a command section at Chinaimo, had inherited from the French an assortment of M24 light tanks, M8 armoured cars, M3 half-tracks, and M3A1 scout cars filling companies at Pakse, Thakhek, and Chinaimo. (Four M24 tanks had been disassembled by the French and flown to Luang Prabang in 1953 for use as static pillboxes. The Lao had restored their engines to working order and added them to their order of battle.)

The country's kingdom-wide reserve, the Airborne Command at Wattay Airbase, controlled the 1 and 2 BP. Each of these battalions was authorised 782 men apiece, significantly larger than standard infantry battalions. Overall command was held by Colonel Sourith Don Sasorith, who concurrently headed the aviation branch. A



The ANL commander, Colonel Sounthone Pathammavong (left), and the head of the French military mission to Laos greet an RTA delegation headed by General Sawai Sawaisanyakorn at Wattay, 1956. Southone uses the French M1945 tropical light khaki shirt and pants, which in turn was modelled after the Second World War US Army tropical 'Chino' working dress. He uses older-style rank insignia with an ANL device of a trident and *cakra* discus centred on the shoulder boards; a revised rank design introduced in 1959 was subsequently used through 1975. In the right background are some of the six Cessna L-19s delivered by the PEO in March 1956. (Photo courtesy EPCA via Albert Grandolini)



Prime Minister Phoui Sananikone pins awards to civilians and FAL soldiers, 1959. This is the earliest photograph showing a paratrooper (on left) using the Lao variation of the French airborne beret badge with Shiva's trident replacing the dagger. Both versions – trident and dagger – were used interchangeably by FAR paratroopers through 1975. (Photo courtesy Martin Rathie Collection/Khaosan Pathet Lao Photo Archive Conservation Project)

lacklustre officer of mixed Lao-Vietnamese heritage, Sourith's clout stemmed from his politically powerful family. With a 3 BP under Captain Soutchay Vongsavanh taking shape in early 1960 at Wattay, plans were set for the Airborne Command to become an airborne regiment.

The last major combat arm of the FAL was its paramilitary force, the AD Corps. First raised on a limited basis in 1955, disbanded by 1958, and then resurrected in mid-1959, the AD program was now envisioned as an ambitious countrywide village defence network with an authorised strength of 16,000 men. Theoretically to be organised and trained by the BVs, only two-thirds had arms, and most of those were from antiquated French stocks.

As far as officer training was concerned, the FAL had shifted its Reserve Officer School from Pakse to Dong Hene. The OCS, meantime, had moved in 1959 from Dong Hene to Chinaimo; it was from this latter venue that its fourteenth intake was scheduled to graduate the following year.

Phoumi on the Rise

While Pathet Lao pressure in the northeast had subsided by the fourth quarter of 1959, the RLG was experiencing a different kind of internal turmoil. On 30 December 1959, the prime minister, under pressure from fellow rightists, submitted his resignation. That evening, armoured cars and troops mobilised around key installations in Vientiane. With the support of King Savang Vatthana (who assumed the crown after his father died two months earlier), a caretaker government took hold for the run-up to general elections scheduled for April 1960.

Behind the scenes, it was increasingly apparent that the defence minister, Brigadier General Phoumi Nosavan, was the RLG's emerging strongman. When elections did take place that April – to widespread charges of ballot stuffing – there was little doubt that Phoumi was pulling the strings.

Still, Washington found reason for cheer in Laos. Phoumi, after all, was making all the right protestations against communism. Too, the RLG's National Assembly was now dominated by pro-West rightists; all leftists had been summarily voted out of office. Moreover, the insurgency in Sam Neua remained in remission.

But just as things were looking up, Laos spun into a direction none could have foreseen.

2

THE COUP

At 0300 on 9 August 1960, 2 BP swung into action. One platoon took the FAL headquarters in downtown Vientiane, guarded by just two sentries. Other paratroopers took Wattay Airport, the central bank, the telephone exchange, and the radio station.

The battalion's executive officer, Captain Kong Le, could take these moves knowing that his absentee battalion commander was touring overseas. At the same time, the bulk of RLG leadership was in Luang Prabang to plan the long-delayed royal cremation ceremony for the preceding monarch. Kong Le also knew that the junior officers in 2 BP were among the most competent in the FAL. For example, Lieutenant Deuane Sounnarath, a company commander, had earlier led a commando school at Chinaimo and recently attended the British-run Jungle Warfare School in Malaya.

Lastly, Kong Le knew his was far and away the best battalion in the FAL, made even better after they started rotating elements through Hotfoot's ranger training school at Kilometre 17 outside Vientiane. But with that elite status came a raft of challenging assignments; in May 1960, for example, the General Staff had mobilised two of its companies in an unsuccessful attempt to intercept Pathet Lao leaders who had escaped from Phone Kheng prison.

After two years of such trying deployments, Kong Le was both exhausted and disillusioned by what he perceived as disrespect from the deskbound FAL generals in Vientiane. Motivated to act during the leadership void in the capital, the politically naïve paratrooper captain immediately declared his opposition to corruption and the Cold War competition that was destabilising his kingdom.

While perhaps laudable sentiments, Kong Le's power-grab predictably infuriated the RLG leadership huddling in Luang Prabang. Particularly incensed was the country's strongman, Phoumi Nosavan, who immediately shifted to his powerbase in the southern town of Savannakhet.

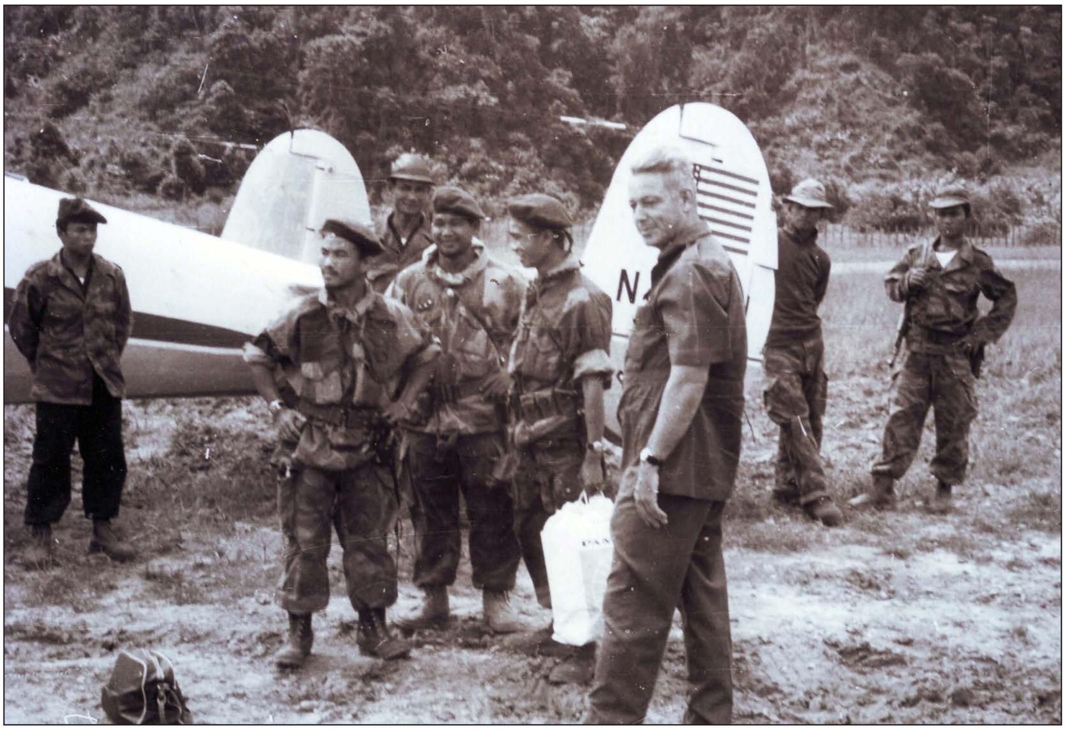
With Kong Le hunkered down in Vientiane and Phoumi in Savannakhet, the FAL top brass had to pick a side. The FAL's aging figurehead of a commander in chief, General Sounthone, remained in Vientiane. So did the deputy commander in chief, General Amkha. The FAL chief of staff, Ouane Rathikoun, hedged his bets and stayed in the capital through mid-November, then belatedly flew to Savannakhet to throw in his lot with Phoumi.

In Luang Prabang, the MR 1 commander, Colonel Houmphanh Norasing, appeared to be leaning toward Kong Le. To convince him otherwise, Phoumi rushed elements of 1 BP to Luang Prabang to ensure it tilted toward Savannakhet.

In Sam Neua Province, the competition got especially tense. There the provincial commander had declared his loyalty was with Savannakhet; to bolster his grip, Phoumi had dispatched elements of 1 BP from Seno as reinforcements. This led Kong Le to respond in kind, dropping some of his 2 BP over Sam Neua on 27 September. Spooked by this, most of the FAL garrison promptly retreated toward the PDJ, allowing the Pathet Lao (who had declared common cause with Kong Le) and their North Vietnamese allies to move largely unopposed into the small provincial capital.

In Xieng Khouang Province, similar competition unfolded. The pro-Phoumi MR 2 commander, Colonel Khamkhong, was lured to Vientiane for negotiations; there he was immediately arrested and thrown in jail. On 7 October, Kong Le announced that General Amkha would be the new MR 2 commander. But when Amkha flew to the PDJ, the commander of BI 10, Major Vang Pao, placed him in shackles and bundled him off to detention in Savannakhet. Colonel Sourith, previously the Airborne Regiment commander, was subsequently named by Phoumi as the new head of MR 2.

As this was transpiring, the US Embassy watched with growing concern. The State Department had initially tried to tread a neutral path, pledging to support whoever the King recognised. But after Kong Le invited the Pathet Lao into Vientiane, followed by North Vietnamese military advisors arriving on a Soviet air bridge from Hanoi, it fast became apparent that Phoumi would get Washington's blessing. Accordingly, Hotfoot advisors in the panhandle began discrete training of FAL units massing around Savannakhet.



Robert 'Dutch' Brongersma with his AT-11 (Beech Model 18) lands supplies for the 2 BP at Sam Neua in July 1959 while under contract to the US Embassy, Vientiane. Captain Kong Le (second from left) and Lieutenant Deuane Sounnarath (fourth from left) wear British 1942 Pattern windproof smocks and French lizard camouflage pants. (Photo courtesy Jack Mathews)

Members of 2 BP in Sam Neua, 1959. From left to right are Captain Kong Le, deputy battalion commander; Captain Sisamouth Sananikone, battalion commander; Ed Perez, ECCOIL's Filipino advisor to the 2 BP; and Lieutenant Deuane Sounnarath, company commander. The three paratroopers wear French TAP camouflage pants. Kong Le wears a British 1942 Pattern windproof smock. On Sisamouth's right pocket is the badge for the US Army's Psychological Warfare School at Fort Bragg, obtained during a recent tour he had taken to the US. (Photo courtesy Jack Mathews)

Finally, with a critical mass of troops on hand, Phoumi in mid-November began his march north to retake Vientiane. Three columns moved in tandem at a glacial pace: one sailed up the Mekong on landing craft, a second consisting of six armoured cars and two M24 tanks motored up Route 13, and a third column comprised of elements from four battalions rode trucks up the same road.

Rounding the top of the panhandle at Paksane – and experiencing the occasional firefight en route – Phoumi's columns closed on the capital by the second week of December. Ahead of them, several sticks from 1 BP from Seno were dropped near Chinaimo military camp. There, the MR 5 commander, Colonel Kouprasith Abhay, had been keeping Kong Le at arm's length over the previous quarter. Now bolstered by Phoumi's paratroops, and with the imminent arrival of the main Phoumi contingent, Kouprasih sprang into action with his armour and artillery.

Predictably, Vientiane was devastated. Heavy-weapons fire set hundreds of buildings alight, including the US Embassy and several ministries. Half-tracks, M24 tanks, and M8 armoured cars edged across the capital as they pushed the rebels toward Wattay.

For his part, Kong Le, who had promoted himself to major general in the interim, gave as good as he got. But hopelessly outnumbered, by 16 December he prudently loaded his paratroopers (as well as his Pathet Lao allies and North Vietnamese advisors) aboard trucks and filed north up Route 13. As they held the ground between Vang Vieng and Moung Kassy, a Soviet transport arrived at the former village on 26 December with another team of North Vietnamese advisors.

Moving triumphantly into Vientiane, Phoumi on 30 December drew up plans for a grand pincer movement against Kong Le's Vang Vieng enclave. Some troops would move south from Luang Prabang. A second prong from MR 2 was to move from the PDJ west along Route 7 to the Sala Phou Khoun junction, then south along Route 13. A third column from MR 5 was to push upward from Vientiane.

Before any of this could happen, however, Kong Le's troops raced north to Sala Phou Khoun, then veered east toward the PDJ. Panicking, by the morning of 31 December most of the FAL defenders on the plain were retreating south along Route 4 to Xieng Khouangville. This allowed Kong Le to race unopposed into Phongsavanh and Khang Khay on New Year's Day 1961. A steady stream of Soviet transports from Hanoi soon materialised, delivering to him a dozen 105mm howitzers and eight 85mm field guns. By day's end, at the cost of only three killed and 10 wounded, his forces were in sole possession of the strategic PDJ.

To salvage the FAL's slipping toehold in MR 2, 300 men from 1 BP were loaded aboard C-47s at Wattay on the night of 1 January and dropped near Xieng Khouangville. Kong Le greeted them with a heavy-weapons barrage from the plain. Outgunned, the paratroopers quickly joined the exodus fleeing south along Route 4.

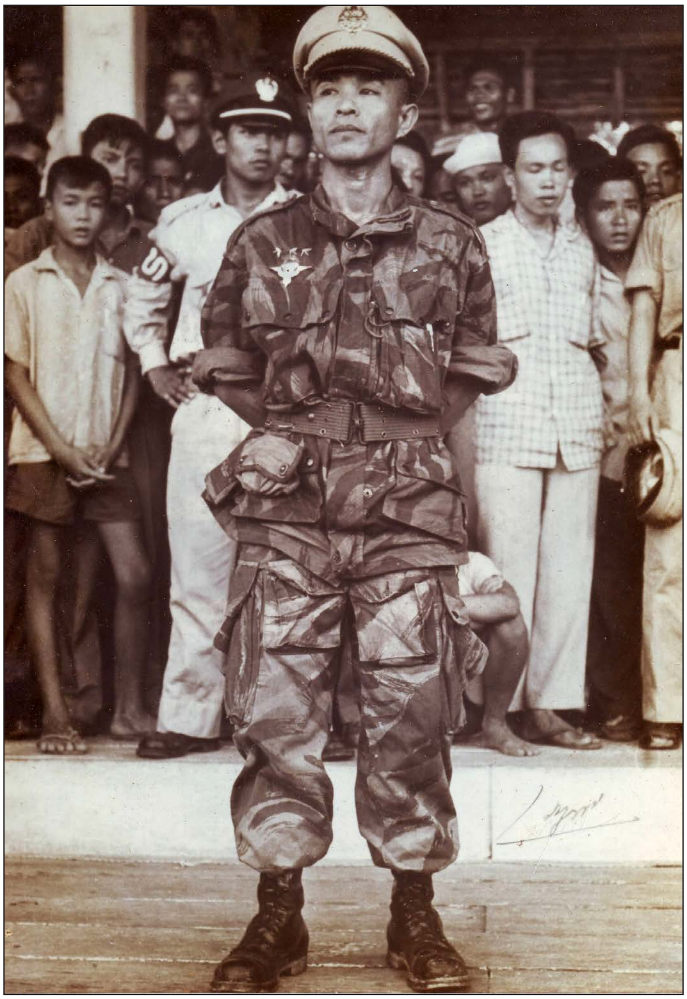
Growing desperate, MR 2 commander Sourith moved 50 kilometres southeast to the village of Ta Vieng and arranged a thin defensive line. Another 22 kilometres southeast of that, he formed a second defensive line at Tha Thom. There they waited for Kong Le to make his next move.

Back in Vientiane, Phoumi paid the unfolding PDJ fiasco little mind. Rather, he wasted no time promoting himself to both major general and minister of national security. He also gave a third star to his loyal deputy and new FAL commander in chief, Major General Bounleut Sanichanh.

More than Kong Le, Phoumi was concerned with the challenge presented by his wily MR 5 commander, Colonel Kouprasith. Realising that Kouprasith had a critical mass of troops at Chinaimo – and thus had the potential to seize the capital for himself – Phoumi showed little willingness to use the men who marched from Savannakhet for any clearing operation along Route 13. In fact, two of his best battalions had firmly planted themselves at the former Phone Kheng prison compound.

Looking elsewhere for troops, several more FAL battalions were airlifted north from the southern reaches of the kingdom. Reinforcing Luang Prabang on 7 January was a battalion from Pakse. On the same day, another battalion was lifted from Savannakhet to Paksane (which, with the loss of Xieng Khouangville, had become the new MR 2 headquarters) with plans to move overland to Tha Thom to bolster Colonel Sourith's defensive line. For Vientiane, BI 12 was sent in from Tchepone.

Swelled by these fresh additions, FAL gradually started to mobilise. After much pleading, Colonel Kouprasith was persuaded to lead a task force north on Route 13. The operation was loosely based on Phoumi's 30 December plan, with Kouprasith's Vientiane



Kong Le addresses a crowd shortly after his 9 August 1960 coup d'état. He wears French TAP Model 1947/52 camouflage and a US pistol belt. Three gold stars for the rank of captain are over his right chest. Kong Le later added three silver stars – for the self-promoted rank of major general – in the centre of the canopy on his jump wings. (Photo courtesy Frank Tatu)

column to clear the rebels from Vang Vieng and link up with a second task force marching south from Luang Prabang, while a third group moved northwest from Tha Thom.

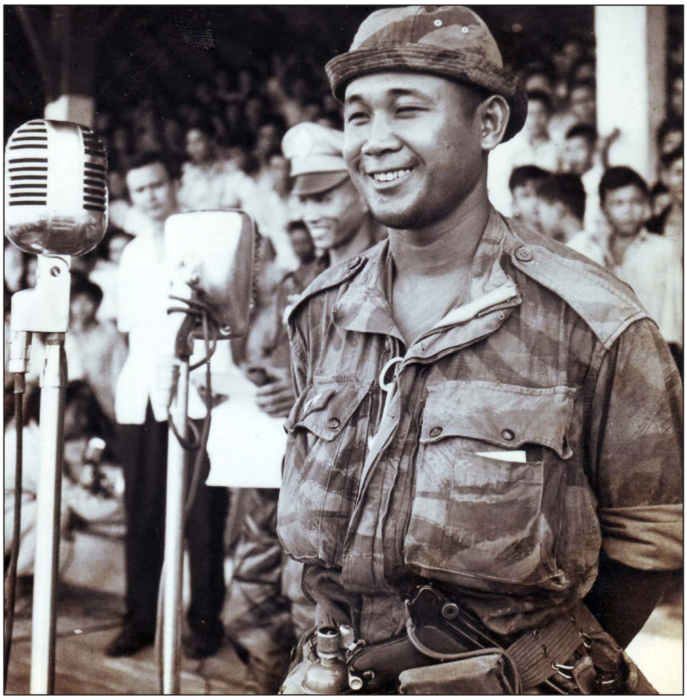
At Kouprasith's disposal was an ad hoc regiment aptly named *Groupement Mobile Vientiane* (GM Vientiane). At its core was the fresh BI 12, supplemented by a trio of other companies, three 105mm howitzers, and half a dozen light armoured vehicles.

To soften anticipated resistance at Vang Vieng, Kouprasith on 11 January called on the newly designated Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF) and its recently-delivered T-6 fighter-bombers. This did the trick, enabling FAL five days later to easily occupy Vang Vieng.

With this minimal gain under his belt, Kouprasith decided that his absence from Vientiane was long enough. He promptly handed over command of his GM and withdraw back to Chinaimo. Under new leadership, GM Vientiane took Muong Kassy and approached Sala Phou Khoun.

While this could be considered progress, the other two prongs barely moved. As a result, the ineffectual Sourith was summarily replaced as MR 2 commander by Colonel Khamkhong Bouddavong, the Phoumi loyalist who had since been sprung from jail. This had no appreciable impact, as Khamkhong's troops still refused to advance.

Watching this non-performance from afar, the Kennedy Administration stepped forward with additional help. In early April, they approved a modest increase in the size of FAL to 32,522 men. (Phoumi, in fact, had taken it upon himself during the first week of February to begin organising six new *Bataillons Spéciaux,* whose elitism extended only as far as their loyalty to the general).



Lieutenant Deuane Sounnarath, with Kong Le visible in the background, riles up a crowd shortly after the 9 August 1960 coup d'état. He is wearing French TAP Model 1947/52 camouflage with a French OF37 grenade and 9mm Luger pistol on the belt. (Photo courtesy Frank Tatu)

A pro-Phoumi paratrooper using a T-7 chute prepares to jump from a C-47 to reinforce Sam Neua, September 1960. (Author's collection)

A new Hotfoot contingent, still listed as civilians under the PEO, began arriving in Laos in late 1960. Among them was Team Moon consisting of (left to right) Sergeant Orville 'Roger' Ballenger, demolitions specialist; Sergeant George Tollinger, mechanic; Sergeant Donald Stetson, radioman; Sergeant First Class John Roy, light weapons specialist; Johnny, interpreter; and Captain Walter Moon, team leader (Master Sergeant Pat Patterson was not present.) The team was photographed while moving into the Kilometre 17 training camp shortly after Kong Le was expelled from Vientiane. Elements of Team Moon were later ambushed north of Vientiane on 22 April 1961; Moon was taken prisoner and killed in captivity. (Photo courtesy Robert McKnight)

Members of 1 BP on the Wattay tarmac prior to being dropped near Moung Kassy, 5 April 1961. They are equipped with US T-7 parachutes. As no canvas rifle carry bags were available, their M1 Garand rifles are wedged under the strap on the sides of the chutes. And since steel helmets were also not readily available, they are jumping with the French Casque Modele 50 TAP padded training cap. (Photo courtesy Robert McKnight)

Meantime, the Luang Prabang column, officially titled GM 11, was augmented by two 105mm howitzer batteries and some M8 armoured vehicles. With these reinforcements, the regiment was able to clear Route 13 down to Sala Phou Khoun, then press five kilometres east along Route 7 before halting in the face of light resistance.

As fast as these gains were realised, they were dashed in March. Communist troops swatted the Luang Prabang column off of the Sala Phou Khoun crossroads, then on 12 March evicted GM 12 from Moung Kassy.

Facing these reverses, Phoumi set about restructuring his army. During the last week of March, he announced that the *groupements mobiles*, which until that time had been ad hoc task forces in the French tradition, would become permanent regiments. By April, seven of these regiments were counted in the FAL order of battle: GM 10, composed of Phoumi's ill-trained special battalions strung along Route 13 south of Luang Prabang (this would be dissolved later in the spring, its men used as fillers elsewhere); GM 11, recently evicted from Sala Phou Khoun; GM 12, which had retreated from Moung Kassy; GM 13, formed from Khamkhong's diverse units around Tha Thom; GM 14, a catchall for FAL battalions in the vicinity of Thakhek; GM 15, a Seno-based umbrella for all FAL airborne units; and GM 16, the new designation given to BIs 4 and 26 on Route 13, both previously part of GM 11.

Kennedy also allowed the 107-strong Hotfoot contingent (now called Monkhood) to accompany FAL units on combat operations. On 31 January, the new PEO chief, Andrew Jackson Boyle, requested nine more Monkhood teams, allowing for one team with each of the 21 existing or planned FAL battalions.

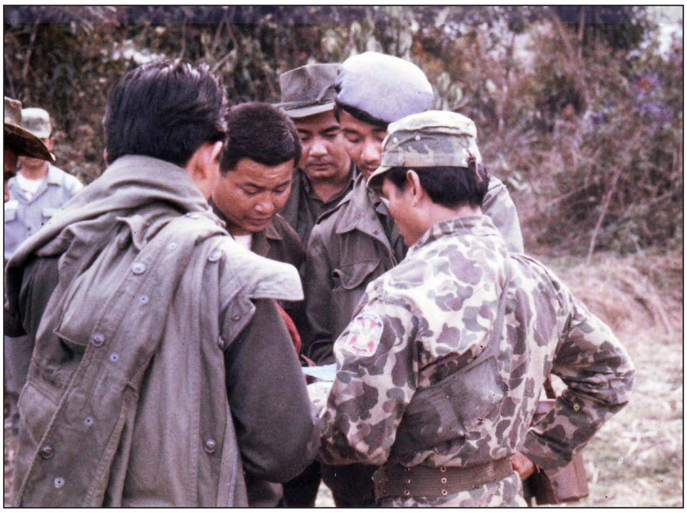
Back along Route 13, GM Vientiane (now going by the name GM 12) on 4 February extended its hold north to the Sala Phou Khoun road junction. Reinforced by BI 6, six M24 tanks and two M8 armoured cars, the regiment spent the remainder of the month consolidating its hold along Route 13.

Phoumi also decreed that the OCS at Chinaimo would now be upgraded to a military academy. This entailed expanding its curriculum to two years instead of just one.

Lastly, Phoumi created the posts of Surface Defence Command, which controlled all volunteer battalions, and Ground Forces Command, which theoretically oversaw all *groupements mobiles*. Held by Generals Bounpone Marthepharak and Sang, respectively, these last slots in reality accomplished little more than allowing Phoumi to hand out pretentious titles to two senior loyalists.

Perhaps not by coincidence, Kong Le's grandly-titled Neutralist Armed Forces (*Forces Armées Neutralistes*, or FAN) was also

Team Roy from the second Hotfoot increment instructs FAL troops in the M1 Garand at Savannakhet, 1960. The Lao troops have been issued OG-107 utility uniforms, though the instructor in the foreground wears French TAP camouflage pants and French canvas jungle boots. (Photo courtesy Robert McKnight)



Lieutenant Colonel Nouphet Daoheuang (right), commander of GM 18, confers with the MR 1 commander, Colonel Sourith Don Sasorith (fourth from right), and other senior FAR officers at Nam Tha, early 1962. Nouphet wears Second World War-era M1942 Frog Skin camouflage, probably given to him by his USSF White Star advisory team. He also wears a cap fashioned from Mitchell Pattern maple leaf camouflage; the rear drawstring is patterned after Imperial Japanese caps in the Second World War. This headgear was likely fashioned in Okinawa and also passed to Nouphet by his USSF team. (Photo courtesy Robert McKnight)

expanding and restructuring. By late March, raw recruits had swelled 2 BP into six plump companies. Splitting the battalion along company lines, Kong Le was then able to multiply his original 2 BP into six distinct units: the first five companies became 1 through 5 BP; the sixth company was designated an Airborne Training Centre (*Base Aéroporté Parachutistes*, or BAP). Given its dearth of parachutes and available aircraft, the BAP performed little training and the FAN parachute battalions, apart from the core of veterans each was allotted from the original 2 BP, were airborne in name only.

Along Route 13, meantime, FAN and communist forces were busy consolidating their hold around Moung Kassy. To prod the FAL into action against this target, the PEO penned an ambitious airborne/airmobile assault by two battalions. Both were to seize Route 13 north of Moung Kassy and await reinforcements from the road-bound regiments closing from both sides. On the morning of 5 April, half of a newly-constituted 1 BP (the old 1 BP, near Tha Thom, had since been redesignated as 11 BP) assembled at Wattay for the scheduled jump. Joining them was an elite Thai PARU advisory team as well as two Monkhood instructors. Packing into RLAF C-47s, this airborne force flew north and parachuted 16 kilometres northeast of Moung Kassy.

Once Vientiane received the clear signal, Air America H-34s onloaded an infantry battalion and the remainder of 1 BP; they were airlifted to the secured landing zone without major incident. Unfortunately, after four days none of the road-bound troops had moved past their starting points. Isolated and vulnerable, the airhead collapsed and the two battalions made their way through the jungle toward Luang Prabang.

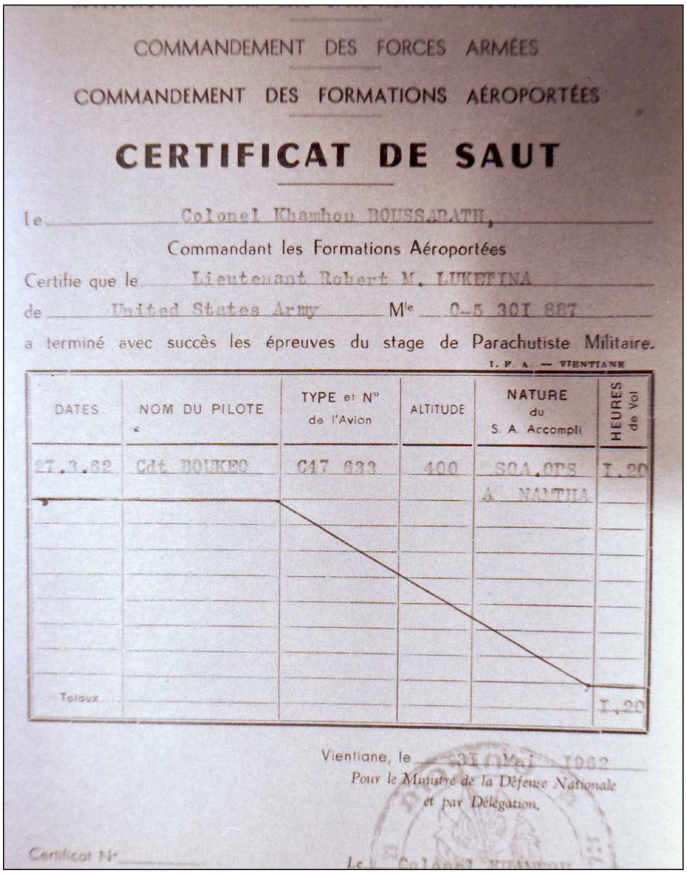
Once more exasperated by FAL, the Kennedy Administration looked for new ways to inspire their Lao allies. On a symbolic level, on 19 April the ostensibly civilian PEO was transformed into an overt Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG). This change entitled MAAG personnel to openly refer to their rank and wear military uniforms. At the same time, the Monkhood Special Forces detachments were redesignated White Star Mobile Training Teams.

One such White Star team, headed by Captain Walter Moon, was assigned to GM 12, which by 22 April had inched up Route 13 until it was just south of Vang Vieng. Riding at the head of the column, the four-man USSF team continuously prodded the regiment's lead battalion forward. Once it hit a pocket of rebel resistance, however, the regiment immediately began to crumble. Two advisors atop an armoured car were killed. Moon and his demolition specialist, Sergeant Orville Ballenger, jumped into a roadside ditch. Moon was immediately captured; Ballenger escaped overnight but was soon imprisoned with the captain. Moon would later be executed by his captors; his remains were never recovered.

Within a day after being rebuffed at Vang Vieng, a tattered GM 12 withdrew to the village of Ban Hin Heup. Given the gravity of the situation, Phoumi on 25 April ordered some of his troops at Phone Kheng to blocking positions north of GM 12.

Phoumi need not have bothered. On 1 May, the Pathet Lao – now eager for a ceasefire that would codify their gains along Route 13 – dispatched a representative to the FAL frontline and discuss terms for a local truce. Two days later, Pathet Lao and FAN commanders ordered their men to stop firing; Phoumi issued an identical decree to his troops. By mid-month, international peace talks commenced in Geneva and the war in Laos was put on hold.

While the RLG spent the summer and early fall respecting the ceasefire, the US was hedging its bets by continuing to retrain the Lao military, renamed the Royal Armed Forces (*Forces Armées Royales*, or FAR) on 15 September. In addition to the instruction being rendered by White Star teams, the US also had gotten Thailand to reopen the old Erawan camp at Lopburi. Now going by the name Project Ekarad (Lao for 'Independent'), the first Lao infantry battalion had arrived there on 29 April for a one-month



COMMANDEMENT DES FORCES ARMÉES

COMMANDEMENT DES FORMATIONS AÉROPORTÉES

CERTIFICAT DE SAUT

le Colonel Khamhou BOUSSARATH,

Commandant les Formations Aéroportées

Certifie que le Lieutenant Robert M. LUKETINA

de United States Army M^le^ 0-5 301 887

a terminé avec succès les épreuves du stage de Parachutiste Militaire.

I. F. A. — VIENTIANE

DATES	NOM DU PILOTE	TYPE et N° de l'Avion	ALTITUDE	NATURE du S. A. Accompli	HEURES de Vol
27.3.62	Cdt BOUKEO	C47 633	400	SOA.OPS A NAMTHA	I.20
Totaux					I.20

Vientiane, le 31 Mai 1962

Pour le Ministre de la Défense Nationale et par Délégation,

Certificat N°

Le L Colonel

Colonel Khamhou Boussarath, commander of the airborne GM 15, issued this jump certificate to Robin Luketina, the White Star lieutenant who parachuted into the Nam Tha garrison with 55 BP on 27 March 1962. (Author's collection)

refresher course. By year's end, eight infantry battalions and six artillery batteries were scheduled to complete Thai instruction.

For his part, Phoumi spent the ceasefire forging two new FAR regiments. GM 17 was formed using half of GM 12 as its core. Shipped south, the regiment first operated near Saravane, then Moung Phalane for the remainder of 1961. GM 18 was recruited around Savannakhet during the fall, then sent for Ekarad training at Lopburi.

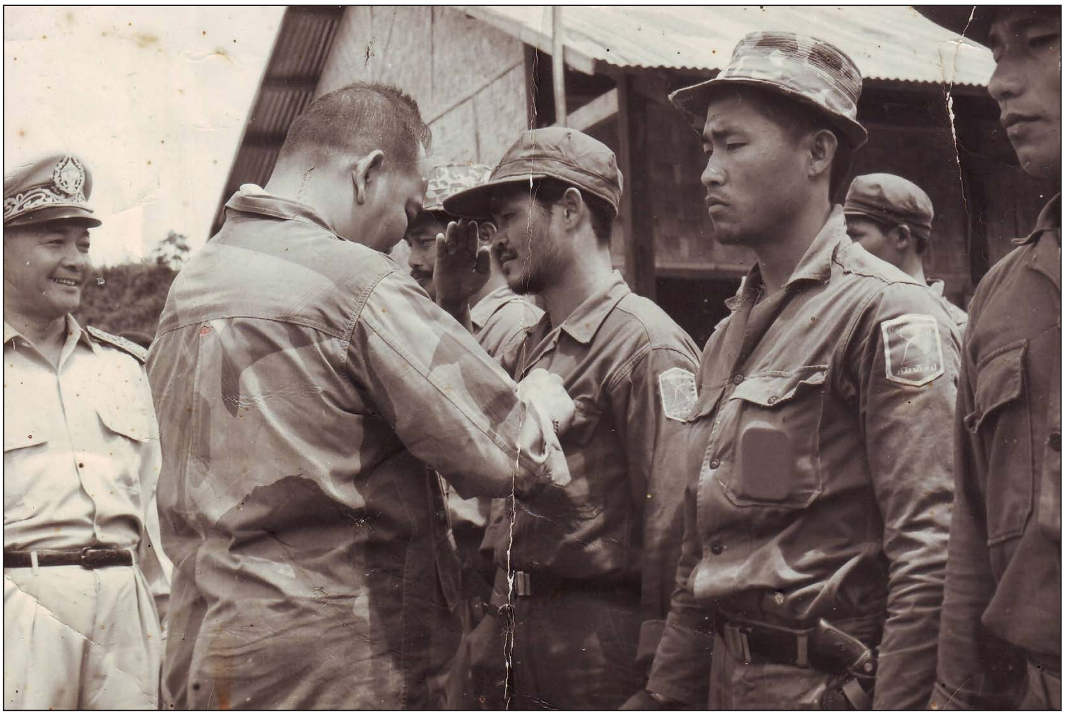
In 1962, Phoumi had also established two new military regions: MR 6, which encompassed Sayaboury Province, and MR 7, consisting only of western Champassac Province. In addition to regional defence responsibilities, each new MR was mandated to open a reserve officer training school, in addition to the one already at Dong Hene. Phoumi also created a Southern Laos Command (*Groupement Tactique Sud*) in Savannakhet under General Houmphanh Norasing, and a Northern Laos Command (GT Nord) in Luang Prabang under General La Pathammavong. Although none of these slots were born of military necessity, they nevertheless added four grandiose titles for Phoumi to use in rewarding the loyal among FAR's growing number of general officers.

On a more substantive level, Phoumi in the second half of 1961 had decided to reassert the RLG presence in the western quadrant of MR 1. Because the crisis around Vientiane had consumed everyone's attention, large swaths of this area had been abandoned early in the year. As it had yet to be occupied by any sizable numbers of communist troops, Phoumi figured the FAR could move back into the void without seriously violating the ceasefire. Unfortunately, when GM 11 was assigned with spearheading the effort to move toward the town of Moung Sai, it handed in an especially soft performance through year's end.

To restart the drive, the FAR General Staff during late January 1962 dispatched its newest regiment, GM 18 from MR 3. Its three battalions were loaded into RLAF C-47s and air-landed at the northwest town of Nam Tha, along with a 75mm pack howitzer battery and a White Star advisory team.

By that time, the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese saw the massing FAR and responded in early February by mobilising their own troops near Nam Tha. After the Nam Tha airstrip came under mortar fire, the FAR General Staff ratcheted up the heat on 12 February by dispatching 1 BP from Seno. They were joined on 6 March by three 105mm howitzers and an ECCOIL artillery crew. Another two weeks after that, FAR's best-rated battalion, 55 BP, received orders to head north from Seno. On 27 March, these paratroopers, along with three White Star advisors, jumped into the fast-expanding garrison.

None of which had much impact in stifling communist pressure. By the first week of April, with up to 100 shells landing in and around the town daily, Nam Tha was feeling the pinch. In addition, 1 BP had



Major General Phoumi Nosavan hands out awards to the Thai PARU team attached to GM 13 in 1962. During the First Indochina War, the British provided 1942 Pattern windproof smocks to the French; after 1954, the French transferred a limited quantity of these to the ANL. Phoumi modified his British windproof smock by removing the hood, adding a collar, and fashioning buttons down the front; photographs show him wearing this on multiple occasions between 1960 and 1962. On the left is Minister of Telecommunications Tiao Sisoumang Sisaleumsack. (Author's collection)

The MR 2 commander, Colonel Khamkhong Bouddavong (standing, fifth from left), along with the MR 2 staff and leadership of GM 13 give bouquets to departing PARU advisors, 1962. Note the remarkable variety of headgear, ranging from Khamkhong's bush hat to berets to Mao caps strongly reminiscent of what was worn by the Pathet Lao. (Author's collection)

ກະຊວງປ້ອງກັນປະເທດ

The original Defense Ministry building in Vientiane, just south of the National Stadium. After the February 1965 coup, the Defense Ministry and FAR headquarters together moved to a new compound at Phone Kheng. This original Defense Ministry building was subsequently used as the office of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. (Author's collection)

fallen into a bad ambush, suffering 50 percent casualties. Worse, Phoumi recalled two battalions from GM 11 to Vientiane in order to help build a monument dedicated to his December 1960 liberation of the capital.

To shore up Nam Tha's defences, the FAR General Staff on 8 April dispatched General La Pathammavong, the Northern Laos commander, to personally coordinate operations. One week after that, half of GM 15's third and final airborne battalion, 11 BP, jumped into the besieged provincial capital. With GMs 15 and 18 at his disposal, La began to register slow gains. Most significant, paratroopers were able to infiltrate east, cutting behind communist resupply trails leading to the ridgeline overlooking the town.

On 1 May, the remaining companies of 11 BP arrived, raising the FAR garrison to 4,500 troops. All was for naught, however, for on the morning of 6 May a sense of hysteria took hold among Nam Tha's defenders after a column of dispirited paratroopers streamed through town. By 0700 hours, the FAR pack howitzer battery had spiked its tubes and joined the airborne troops in a disorganised withdrawal southwest.

In short order, the town of Ban Houei Sai on the Mekong turned into an armed camp as FAR stragglers from GMs 18 and 15 arrived from Nam Tha. Generals La and Bounleut made a brief appearance, joined by the new MR 1 commander, Colonel Sourith. Spooked by reports of approaching communist forces, Sourith – whose list of leadership gaffs was long and growing – ordered the town's ammunition dump blown up, the noise from which spread further panic through the troops. At that point, Bounleut – allegedly following a directive personally issued by Phoumi to force greater US backing – ordered the soldiers to abandon Ban Houei Sai and cross the Mekong into Thai territory. There, to conclude this most shameful FAR performance, the Thai authorities disarmed the demoralised Lao troops before repatriation.

3

COALITION, AGAIN

If the FAR top brass was embarrassed by Nam Tha, they had little time to hang their heads. In July 1962, the RLG signed onto a new Geneva Agreement. This was largely a rehash of the 1954 document, with all of its shortcomings. For example, while all foreign troops were obliged to exit the kingdom (White Star teams exited as directed, and the MAAG was dissolved), the system to monitor compliance was wanting. Predictably, the North Vietnamese exploited this weakness by maintaining a sizable combat contingent in the panhandle as well as an advisory element to the Pathet Lao in Sam Neua.

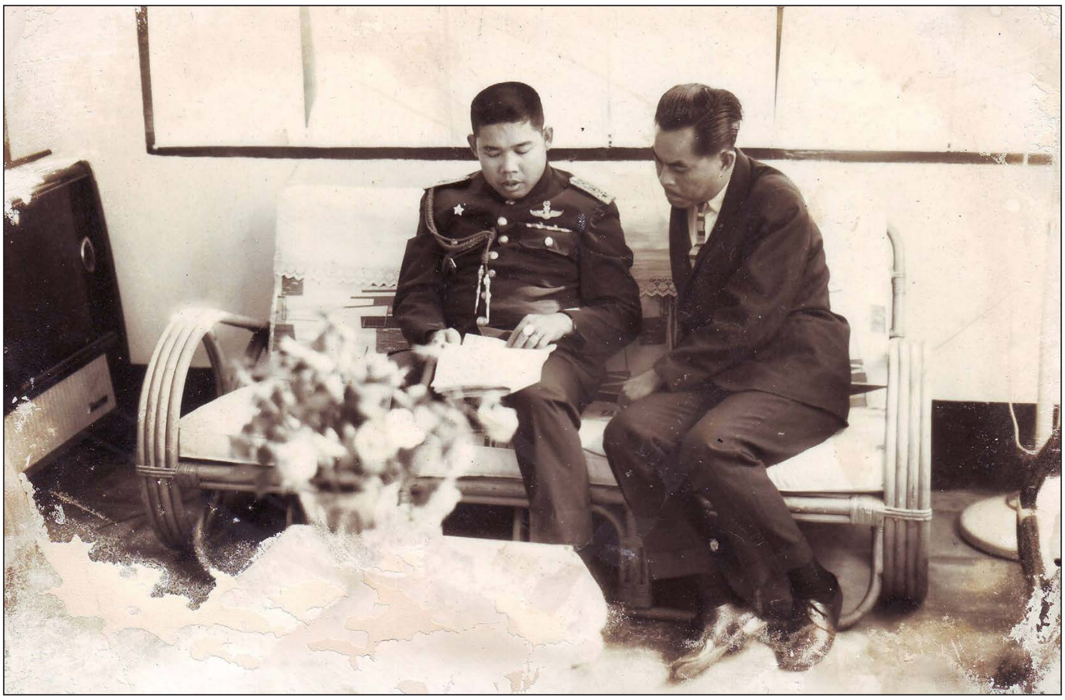
The centrepiece of the Geneva accords was the creation – once again – of a coalition government. This time it would balance participation of three factions: Phoumi's rightists, Kong Le's Neutralists (including the prime minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma), and the communist Pathet Lao. All three would be represented in the cabinet, and all three would have their own military.

The largest of these armies was the 51,000-man FAR. Remaining as its commander in chief was Phoumi's ally, Major General Bounleut, who had gained the second hat of Northern Laos commander (forfeited by General La Pathammavong after the Nam Tha debacle). Under Bounleut was Chief of Staff Ouane Rathikoun, who finally had finessed the rank of major general from Phoumi. Rounding out FAR's uppermost echelon were the Southern Laos and Surface Defence commands, both now held by the stocky but moderately competent Brigadier General Bounpone, and the Ground Forces Command under General Sang.

Below this array of overlapping titles were the seven MR commanders. MRs 2 and 3 were led by Colonels Khamkhong and Lamnguem Phrasavath, respectively, both Phoumi loyalists. MR 5 remained the domain of Colonel Kouprasith, who had been able to maintain his hold despite opposition from Phoumi. MRs 1, 4, and 6 went to Colonels Sourith, Phasouk Somly Rasphakdi, and Houmphanh, respectively, all fence-sitting in the army's internecine power struggles.

In as the new MR 4 commander was Colonel Phasouk Somly Rasphakdi, who had just returned from Paris after completing the French War College. Shunted to MR 7, meanwhile, was the ineffectual Colonel Kot Venevongsos. Kot had previously served three uninspiring years as head of MR 4, but had showed remarkable resilience owing to his wife being a cousin of the reigning prince from south Laos.

In MR 1, the region's only regiment, GM 11, was fixed at Luang Prabang. Elsewhere in the region were spread three BVs, four new regional battalions (*Bataillon Régionaux*, or BR), and 35 FAR-


The DNC director general, Brigadier General Siho Lanphouthacoul (left), confers with senior police officer Tiao Khampheng, 1963. Siho adopted a black dress uniform for the DNC; during this timeframe, Phoumi Nosavan was advocating a black dress uniform for the entire FAR. Though he never jumped, Siho wears master DNC parachute wings over his left breast. Barely visible on his right breast is the insignia for the French *École d'état-major* (Army Staff School); Siho did not actually graduate from this school, but rather acted as Phoumi Nosavan's adjutant when the latter attended the French War College. (Author's collection)

PARU Lieutenant Wichien Jarentham demonstrates firing a .30-calibre M1919 Browning from the hip to DNC students, 1963. He later died demonstrating a water-jump in the Mekong. (Author's collection)

sponsored ADC militia units. (The BRs were eligible for deployment anywhere within their region, whereas the BVs were responsible for a single province.)

In MR 2, a single infantry regiment, GM 13, was based at Paksane, as were BVs 22 and 51. A second, unofficial regiment – GM B, commanded by Colonel Vang Pao – comprised five understrength BVs and two BRs in Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua Provinces. In addition, 23 ADC units were maintained on FAR rosters (not including the fast-growing number of CIA-sponsored ADC and other Hmong guerrilla units).

MR 3 was home to the strongest FAR contingent. At Thakhek were two regiments, GMs 12 and 14, while collocated with the French at Seno was the airborne GM 15. Four BVs were distributed across the region, as well as a single regional battalion, BR 350, and 34 ADC.

MR 4 contained two regiments. The first, GM 16, was at Attopeu. The second, GM 18 at Pakse, was on its way to full recovery following the losses incurred at Nam Tha. In addition, the region contained four BVs and four BRs, as well as 21 ADC (not including a dozen CIA-funded ADC companies on the Bolovens, since demobilised).

MR 5, which faced little communist threat, contained the highly politicised GM 17 under Colonel Atsaphanthong Pathammavong, a Kouprasith protégé. The region additionally fielded four BVs and nine ADC units.

MRs 6 and 7, both along the Thai border and far removed from serious communist threat, hosted reserve officer training centres and other training camps. In addition, both regions had a single BV.

Much smaller than FAR was the 8,000-strong FAN. Leadership still rested with the idealistic Kong Le, who spent most of his time at the FAN headquarters in Khang Khay. Under Kong Le, FAN had parroted FAR by creating military regions. MR 1, based in Phongsaly, was led by Khamouane Boupha, a once highly respected (and pro-American) provincial commander. Now a self-styled brigadier general, he had three ill-equipped, understrength battalions under his charge. MR 2, headquartered at Phongsavanh, contained the bulk of FAN forces. Commanded by Colonel Ketsana Vongsouvanh, the region included four of the five FAN parachute battalions, an Airborne Training Centre at Moung Phanh, and two artillery battalions. MR 3, under Col. Kene Phongvidone, consisted of just three outposts: Tchepone, garrisoned by the recently formed BI 4; Mahaxay, occupied by 5 BP; and Nhommarath, home to the new BI 5 and a PT-76 tank company. Even smaller was MR 5, headed by Colonel Deuane and consisting solely of the Vang Vieng garrison. Sharing space with a Pathet Lao contingent, Vang Vieng was defended by two newly formed FAN infantry battalions, BIs 1 and 2.

Curiously, although Kong Le took pains to portray the FAN as a separate army, it intentionally mimicked the FAR in its heraldry. For example, it retained the same designs for its cap badge (Shiva's trident surrounded by Vishnu's discus), airborne wings, and collar devices. The gates to its military bases were also adorned by the trident and discus, as were its vehicles.

These similarities had been on full display when US Ambassador Leonard Unger on 27 September 1962 flew up to the PDJ to meet Kong Le. There he reviewed a line of Soviet-made PT-76 amphibious tanks and armoured cars – all in markings identical to FAR – which had been turned over by North Vietnam to FAN the previous December.

In fact, not all was well between Kong Le and his erstwhile communist allies. For example, when FAN established a rudimentary military academy at Phongsavanh, the North Vietnamese insisted on placing themselves in key instructor slots; Kong Le balked, petitioning instead the French military training mission to dispatch a team to run the school. And when North Vietnam had earlier finished training FAN armour crews on the PDJ, it suddenly refused to turn over the promised PT-76 fleet. Calling their bluff, Kong Le had his designated armour commander seize the tanks; in response, North Vietnam embargoed ammunition.

Relations between FAN and the communists deteriorated further in the immediate months after the establishment of the coalition government. In February 1963, Colonel Ketsana, the FAN MR 2 commander who was growing critical of the Pathet Lao, was shot in the head. Implicated in his murder was Colonel Deuane, the FAN MR 5 commander who was increasingly siding with the Pathet Lao against Kong Le.

By April 1963, tensions ratcheted up exponentially. Early that month, the Pathet Lao launched a surprise attack on the Neutralists, forcing FAN to abandon positions at Khang Khay, Phongsavanh, the Ban Ban valley, and Xieng Khouangville. Most evacuated with their crew-served weapons, and nearly all PT-76 tanks and armoured cars managed to rendezvous at the new FAN headquarters at Moung Phanh, further west on the PDJ. As a weak payback, Neutralist

Members of the DNC's GMS practice aircraft exits prior to conducting jumps, April 1963. (Author's Collection)

forces managed to consolidate their hold over Vang Vieng, forcing the Pathet Lao portion of the garrison north toward Moung Kassy.

Although the bulk of FAN was still intact, Kong Le's grip was fast fading. Several of his units had openly sided against him, including an artillery battalion, 1 BP, most of the Tchepone-based BI 4, and all of Brigadier General Khamouane's MR 1. In addition, Kong Le's wayward subordinate, Colonel Deuane, had taken up residence with the Pathet Lao at Khang Khay, whereupon he accepted titular control over the rebel FAN units and founded a new pro-Pathet Lao splinter faction, dubbed the Patriotic Neutralist Forces.

Watching this unfold, on 10 April the Kennedy Administration authorised covert deliveries of military supplies to both the FAN and CIA-backed Hmong guerrillas. Ammunition and equipment began to flow to the Neutralists by the close of the month.

Debacle on the Nakay Plateau

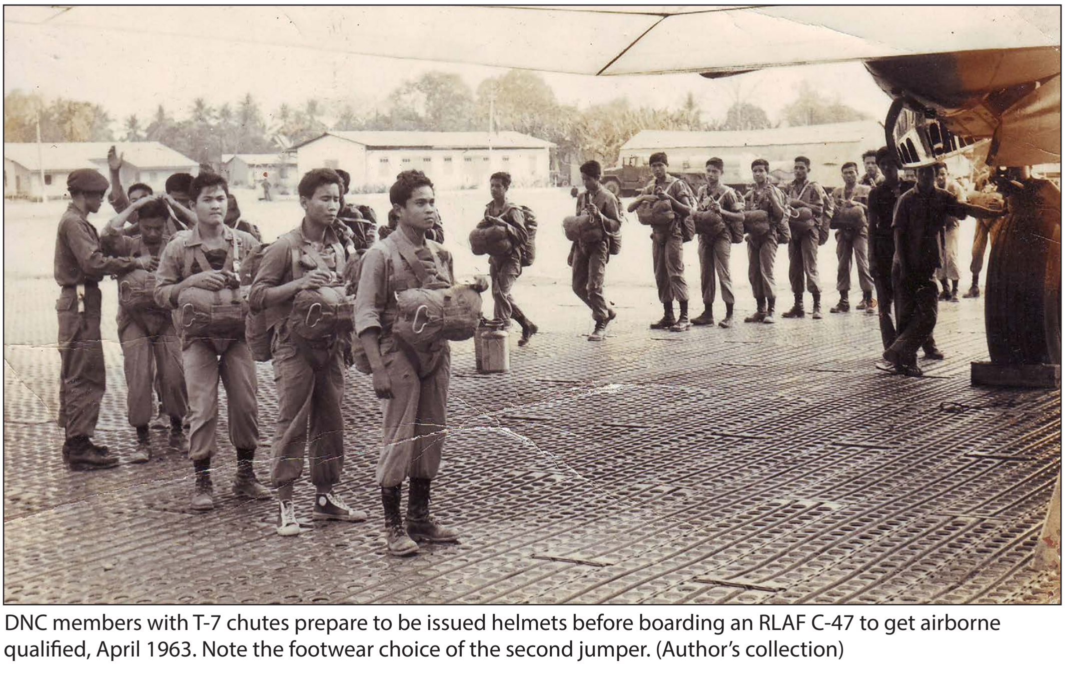
Also looking to win over the Neutralists was the FAR top brass. Back in March 1963, they had allowed FAN units to parade alongside them during the annual Army Day parade in Vientiane. And on 22 April, Phoumi rushed two Thakhek-based infantry battalions to reinforce FAN on the southeast edge of the PDJ.

These confidence-building measures soon gave way to calls for joint military operations. This ultimately led to a November 1963 plan to move against the communists in the upper panhandle. Timing of the move was curious, as the normally strong FAR defences at Thakhek were partly redeployed to bolster Kong Le on the PDJ. FAN forces in the northern panhandle were also on weak footing, having been evicted from Mahaxay earlier in the year.

Undeterred, FAR and FAN tacticians hatched a scheme to push from Nhommarath up Route 8 and onto the Nakay Plateau. Upon reaching Lak Sao, they would then turn northeast toward the Nape Pass.

Because the operation would press close to the North Vietnamese border, and because it presented logistical challenges likely beyond the abilities of FAR or FAN, the US Embassy withheld its blessing. Regardless, Phoumi persisted. With General Sang, the Ground Forces commander, placed in overall charge, the campaign saw early gains. By the end of November 1963, a FAN column comprised of BI 8 (a new unit), 5 BP, and a PT-76 tank company went from Nhommarath up to Lak Sao with little opposition. The FAN tank commander was then placed in charge of the town's defences. Meanwhile, 30 kilometres to the west, elements of FAR's BR 350 occupied Khamkeut.

Predictably, the North Vietnamese began to respond forcefully. On 15 December, an estimated three battalions surged down Route 8 in the north and along Route 12 through Mu Gia farther south. As the forward FAR and FAN elements cried for assistance, the following day 11 BP loaded aboard RLAF C-47s for a reinforcement jump into Khamkeut. Assembling on the ground, the battalion cautiously worked its way east over the next three days, arriving at Lak Sao and taking charge from the FAN contingent.



DNC members with T-7 chutes prepare to be issued helmets before boarding an RLAF C-47 to get airborne qualified, April 1963. Note the footwear choice of the second jumper. (Author's collection)

To that point, contact had been light. But when the paratroopers pushed a few kilometres up Route 8, the North Vietnamese let the hammer down. Bloodied, the airborne troops raced back through FAN lines at Lak Sao, halting at their original Khamkeut drop zone. On the heels of the paratroopers, communist troops approached Khamkeut and rained mortars from the jungle, setting the village aflame. Panicking, the FAR garrison filtered west.

Its sister battalion in trouble, Lieutenant Colonel Soutchay's 55 BP was alerted for an emergency reinforcement jump 18 kilometres southwest of 11 BP's position. En route to the drop zone, the weather turned foul; General Sang, however, vetoed a postponement. Soutchay and half his battalion exited the planes – and were promptly blown across a karst ridge. With most of the paratroopers temporarily disabled, the drop was not resumed until the following morning.

Eventually, the two airborne battalions linked up and together circumvented Khamkeut to provide a diversion near Lak Sao, theoretically enabling the hard-pressed FAN to withdraw down Route 8 in the direction of Nhommarath. Coordination quickly proved a problem, with few units giving a good account of themselves.

Shortly after the New Year, the communists looked to close this chapter by sweeping in force across the Nakay Plateau. FAR and FAN troops at Khamkeut promptly broke and ran. The FAN armour company eventually emerged near Thakhek and was flown to the PDJ, thus ending FAN's token presence in MR 3. The two FAR airborne battalions managed to regroup northwest of Thakhek. From there, 55 BP returned to Seno; 11 BP, exhausted and battered, was flown to Lopburi as the first unit for a resurrected RTA training program named Project 007. (For those keeping track, this was the third iteration of an RTA training program, after Erawan and Ekarad.)

Paratroopers in Parallel

Back when Phoumi Nosavan had conducted his march on Vientiane in late 1960, two special battalions of diehard loyalists – dubbed BS 11 and BS 33 – had comprised the column sailing up the Mekong on landing craft. These were under the command of his long-time adjutant, Major Siho Lanphouthacoul, whose cherubic face and chunky frame belied an especially ruthless persona.

Once in Vientiane, Siho took the military police under his wing and converted their prison at Phone Kheng into his headquarters. Further, on the pretext of eliminating Pathet Lao influence from the civilian police, he wrested full control of the Lao National Police from the Ministry of Interior. For good measure, he also absorbed customs, immigration, and military intelligence.

In March 1961, Siho reformed his mushrooming array of assets into the Directorate of National Coordination (DNC), which was outside of the FAR mainstream and answered directly to Minister of National Security Phoumi. With the rank of lieutenant colonel, Siho became its director general.

Two months later, Siho brazenly maneuvered to eliminate one of his main competitors. Major Tiao Ekarath Souvannarth, a prince who in 1954 was the first Lao to graduate from the Saint-Cyr Military Academy in France, had led the armoured column from Savannakhet to Vientiane during Phoumi's counter-coup. Considered one of the rising stars in the army – more than Siho's equal when it came to intellect and ability – he was mysteriously gunned down while parked at roadside in Vientiane on 10 May. Though the murder went unsolved, few doubted Siho had arranged for the trigger to be pulled.

From the beginning, the DNC's mandate was extensive: police and military police duties in urban areas; intelligence; psychological warfare; the defence of Vientiane (from both communists as well as MR 5 commander Kouprasith); and special operations. Phone Keng became the DNC's combined headquarters, intelligence school, and interrogation centre. The US Embassy looked upon the DNC with suspicion and did not support it under PEO or MAAG programs; the CIA station, however, did assign one liaison officer (Deputy Station Chief Cliff Strathern) to Siho. The CIA also arranged for the DNC to be assisted by a team of Thai PARU commandos.

While elements of the DNC soon became heavily tainted by graft, there was no denying that its special battalions – gathered under a *Groupement Mobile Speciale*, or GMS – were among the best in Laos. This was due in large part to the quality of its officers. Command of the GMS, for example, was held by highly-rated Lieutenant Colonel Thao Ly Lithilusa, Siho's classmate in reserve officer training; Thao Ly was also among the first four Lao to attend instruction at Fort Benning. Another standout was Chanh Nosavan, the adopted son of Phoumi; in mid-1962, he was posted as commander of the GMS's newly raised third battalion, BS 99.

Shortly after the coalition government was formed, the GMS's three special battalions were mandated to conduct anti-communist guerrilla operations in the event that Vientiane was threatened or occupied. To do this, a second DNC base was established in 1962 at Phou Khao Khouai, a curved massif 46 kilometres northeast of the capital.

As months passed without serious Pathet Lao encroachment, Siho kept himself busy harassing communist representatives inside the capital. Promoted to colonel by the end of 1962, he dispatched half a dozen men to Hua Hin, Thailand, for parachute jumpmaster training under PARU auspices. After their return, the rice paddies outside Phone Kheng beginning in April 1963 were used as a drop zone for the three-battalion GMS, which was upgraded to an airborne regiment.

Siho himself took leave for three months in early 1963 to attend command and general staff training in Taiwan. On 1 May, he returned to Laos and was made a brigadier general.

Although by the close of 1963 Siho was among the most powerful men in Vientiane, his much-touted paratroopers remained largely untested in battle. To demonstrate the mettle of his men, Siho dispatched his airborne regiment to Savannakhet in February 1964, whereupon they trucked to Moung Phalane, then dismounted and filtered 18 kilometres south through the jungle. Their target was Nong Boualao, a village fortified by the French before the Second World War and long under Pathet Lao control; it had been the subject of several failed FAR actions during the previous months.

Within a week, DNC paratroopers had taken their goal, dispelling any questions about their capabilities in combat. Siho, however, had no intention of keeping his crack troops on the front line. Abandoning Nong Boualao, the GMS was ordered to walk back to Seno, whereupon it was soon returned to Vientiane.

No sooner had the DNC paratroopers returned to the capital, in April 1964 they were ordered to stage a coup at Siho's behest. Brought in at the eleventh hour as his chief accomplice was Brigadier General Kouprasith, commander of MR 5. A fellow native from southernmost Laos, Kouprasith was the only officer with a sizable concentration of troops in the capital besides the DNC.

With a nod from Kouprasith, the coup began at 2200 hours, 18 April. Siho's BS 33 filtered across the capital, seizing the airport, radio station, and national bank. No resistance was encountered. With the city's infrastructure in his hands, Siho then waited until

Siho reviews members of the DNC's GMS, circa 1963. These special troops use grey uniforms and, paying homage to their PARU instructors, wear black berets pulled down to the right. (Author's collection)

the early morning hours of 19 April before launching the next phase. At 0430 hours, BS 11 paratroopers led by Lieutenant Colonel Thao Ly arrested Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. Others riddled the home of General Bounleut Sanichanh, the FAR commander, with automatic weapons fire. Yet another detachment hit the house of Interior Minister Pheng Phongsavanh, a Neutralist, resulting in a firefight that killed a DNC major and a FAN guard. At the same time, Kong Le's Vientiane home was looted and the FAN safe blown.

By sunrise, the DNC had in custody 15 prominent FAR, Neutralist, and French officials. Sixteen other Neutralists had managed to escape to the Soviet Embassy. Phoumi Nosavan, who was widely seen as Siho's mentor, was only brought into the plot as an afterthought.

Once word of the putsch reverberated across the diplomatic community, the Western embassies were infuriated. Without exception, they preferred to maintain the fig leaf of Laotian neutrality as set out by Geneva. They also had grown comfortable with Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, whose neutrality had taken on a Western tilt. Faced with stiff US-led Western resolve to back the Prime Minister, the generals on 23 April quietly agreed that Souvanna Phouma could continue to lead a coalition government. The DNC retreated back to Phou Khao Khouai and a relative calm, at least on the surface, returned to the capital.

Operation Triangle

While the DNC had been seeing action inside the capital, the FAR had been increasingly busy in MR 2 in support of the beleaguered FAN. During November 1963, the two Royalist battalions southeast of the PDJ had been joined by another infantry battalion. This contingent then moved to Moung Kheung, on the extreme north of the plain.

In early 1964, the FAR General Staff agreed to rotate fresh troops to assist the FAN. This time they shifted two regiments to Xieng Khouang Province: GM 13, normally at Paksane, moved atop a key mountain overlooking Route 4 near Xieng Khouangville; and GM 17, now based in Vientiane under the command of Colonel Atsaphanthong Pathammavong, was dispatched alongside Hmong ADC at Phou San, a mountain at the centre of the PDJ. FAR elements were also ordered to join FAN and Hmong troops east of the PDJ atop Phou Nong. The Pathet Lao began to harass all three mountains; in the case of GM 13, they forced the regiment to withdraw south to Tha Thom.

Then came Siho's coup in April 1964. Enraged that the DNC had arrested several prominent Neutralists in Vientiane, FAN took GM 17 commander Atsaphanthong hostage in retaliation. While the US Army attaché, Colonel William Law, flew up to the PDJ and secured Atsaphanthong's release three days later, a growing number of FAN officers were demanding that Kong Le renounce his growing ties with FAR. Some, like Lieutenant Colonel Chieng Sayavong and Captain Somvong, commanders of 4 BP and the newly formed 6 BP, were openly calling for support of the Patriotic Neutralist splinter faction.

For his part, Atsaphanthong was irate over being detained and in late April began a withdrawal of GM 17 from the PDJ toward Tha Thom. As this was taking place, the Pathet Lao launched a concerted attack on the Royalist column, routing the *groupement mobile* as neighbouring FAN units watched in silence.

Telegraphing their next strike, the Pathet Lao began a move en masse toward the final FAN units on the PDJ. Before the hammer fell, the CIA arranged for Kong Le to visit Sam Thong for a private session with MR 2 commander Vang Pao. In a resulting agreement between the two generals, Kong Le promised to continue fighting even if pushed from the plain, while Vang Pao pledged his Hmong would offer the FAN sanctuary in the hills should they be run off the PDJ.

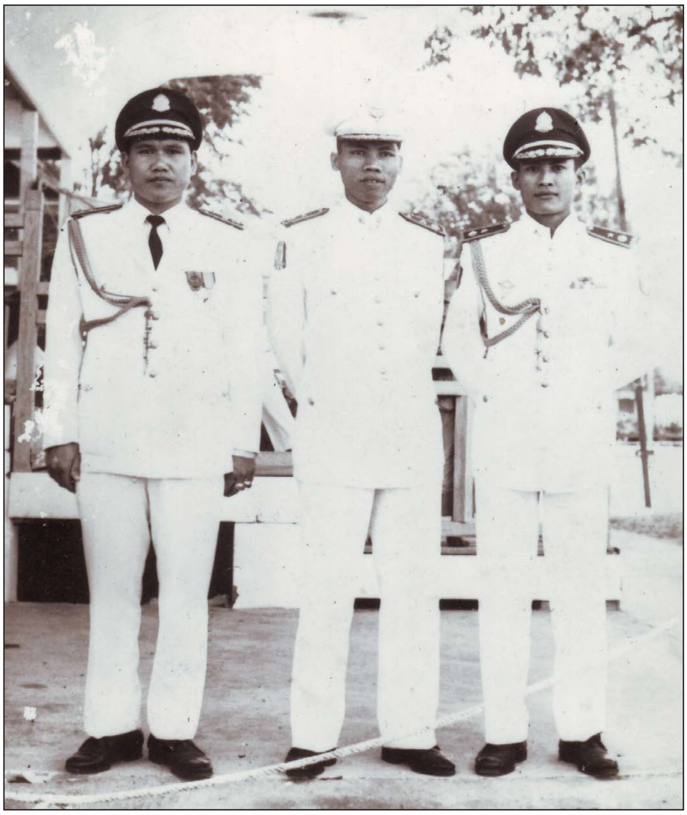
This deal proved fortuitous. Beginning 13 May, the Pathet Lao cut the ground link between the FAN pockets at Moung Phanh and Moung Kheung. The same day, Lieutenant Colonel Chieng of the 4 BP and Lieutenant Colonel Soulideth – commander of the FAN armoured 'regiment' – led an open revolt against Kong Le, demanding that all right-leaning Neutralist officers vacate the PDJ.

Twenty-four hours later, a Pathet Lao battalion, backed by North Vietnamese troops and one company of Patriotic Neutralists, attacked and seized Tha Thom, pushing GM 13 and elements of GM 17 south toward Paksane. That same evening, 4 BP declared loyalty to Deuane's faction.

Looking to deliver a coup de grâce, on 16 May the communists launched a double-pronged envelopment of Kong Le's Moung Phanh headquarters. Lieutenant Colonel Soulideth, the armour commander, attempted to run the gauntlet but was quickly gunned down. His older brother, Captain Panh, tried to rally with the remaining tanks on the northern edge of the PDJ, but soon opted to burn their hardware and exfiltrate on foot. By the afternoon of 18 May, nearly all FAN positions on the plain were abandoned, forcing the general to relocate his command post to Ban Na, a village west of the PDJ.

From his Ban Na quarters, Kong Le had some reason to take heart. Like the earlier FAN retreat from the eastern PDJ in April 1963, the withdrawal off the plain was made in relatively good order.

PARU Captain Thongchai Limsuklam greets a fellow PARU commando who participated in the Laos Skydivers Parachute Meet, 1963. Thongchai, who was head of the PARU advisory team to the DNC, wears the DNC black officer's uniform, master DNC parachute wings, the GMS shoulder insignia, and DNC cap badge. (Author's collection)



DNC Lieutenant Colonel Bone, FAR Lieutenant Colonel Bounnao, and DNC Lieutenant Colonel Khammay, circa 1963. While General Siho adopted a black dress uniform for the DNC, during this occasion DNC officers are using dress white variants with both a standing collar and a tie. In 1968, Colonel Bone was sentenced to five years in prison for his involvement in the February 1965 coup. (Photo courtesy SHAA via Albert Grandolini)

Although his tanks and armoured vehicles were lost, most crew-served weapons had been salvaged and the US Embassy promised to replace any small arms left behind.

Equally comforting was the fact that a sizable chunk of the mutinous 4 BP had second thoughts and by 21 May filtered over to Ban Na. Along with 2 and 3 BP, Kong Le immediately imposed iron discipline over his trio of parachute battalions.

Contemplating the future of his FAN, Kong Le had limited options. Aside from his current position at Ban Na, his men held pockets at Moung Soui and Moung Hiem in MR 2, as well as Vang Vieng on Route 13. At the same time, the US Embassy was urging the general to vacate Ban Na because of that site's inadequate runway and absence of roads leading to and from the base.

Initially reluctant to pack his bags yet again, Kong Le finally agreed to move north to Moung Soui – already garrisoned by the Neutralist BIs 5, 8, and 14 – which offered both a better airstrip and the possibility of land resupply via Route 7. Loading his three parachute battalions into Air America transports, the shift was completed by the close of May.

Moung Soui, it turned out, was far from ideal. Though easier to supply, it was vulnerable to communist attack from either direction along Route 7. Recognising this, Kong Le immediately began to lobby for assistance with its defence. On 9 June, Brigadier General Kouprasith came forward with an offer of four 105mm howitzers. Still unsatisfied, Kong Le made a direct appeal for an RTA artillery unit to be stationed at Moung Soui. With top US, RLG, and Thai officials agreeing to the idea, they began sorting out a deployment plan near month's end.

Also with Moung Soui in mind, the FAR General Staff, in a 9 June meeting with FAN and US Embassy representatives, proposed a sweep from the Neutralist pocket at Vang Vieng up to Sala Phou Khoun, thereby clearing Route 13 and enabling direct road-bound support to Kong Le's new headquarters.

Very quickly, the plan grew in scope. By the third week of June, what was originally to be a single-pronged Route 13 sweep had tripled into three task forces – one each from Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Moung Soui – converging on Sala Phou Khoun. Given the three avenues of approach, the operation was named Triangle.

For those with institutional memory, Triangle was a near-carbon copy of the pincer operation attempted along Route 13 in early 1961. This time around, GM 17 was to march north from Vientiane and link up with the FAN garrison at Vang Vieng; together they would then seize Moung Kassy and press forward toward Sala Phou Khoun. One FAR regiment, GM 16, would be air-landed at Moung Soui, whereupon it would hit the junction from the east. Another FAR battalion would move south from Luang Prabang as a diversion, while Hmong ADC would act as a screen to the east of Route 13. All FAR task forces would be accompanied by 105mm or 75mm pack howitzers.

Against this ensemble, the Pathet Lao had an estimated three battalions (plus antiaircraft guns and a handful of armoured cars) near Sala Phou Khoun, all experiencing logistical problems and believed to be low in morale. Indeed, with a six-to-one advantage going to FAR, the Pathet Lao's poor disposition along Route 13 placed Vientiane in a unique situation.

Looking over the plan, the US Embassy thought it was sound and had a reasonable chance of success. While it no longer had a MAAG, the US Embassy had retained a civilian-manned Requirements Office (RO) under the auspices of the State Department's Agency for International Development (USAID). The RO, much like the pre-Hotfoot days of PEO, was responsible for determining FAR's material needs, coordinating US military equipment deliveries, and evaluating the use of US-supplied weapons. For Operation Triangle, the RO agreed to reequip all participating units with new weapons, uniforms, and shoes. The embassy also secretly introduced 11 USAF and US Army advisors to Laos, who would directly advise FAR/FAN columns for the duration of the operation.

Meantime, to boost FAN defences at Moung Soui before the onset of Triangle, Kong Le's request for RTA artillery was fulfilled on 4 July under the codename Project 008. That day, a 279-man RTA artillery battalion – given the innocuous title of Special Requirements 1 (SR 1) – was loaded aboard Air America C-123s at Korat, Thailand. Flown directly to the Neutralist base, the Thai unit, outfitted with one 155mm and five 105mm howitzers, added considerable heavy-weapons backbone to Kong Le's headquarters.

As Triangle approached its kick-off date, plans were slightly modified. Due to protests from the MR 1 leadership, the Luang Prabang column was increased from one battalion to an entire regiment, GM 11. Overall command of the operation was given to Brigadier General Kouprasith, his first field mission since the disastrous crawl up Route 13 in early 1961.

On 19 July, Triangle at long last began. GM 11 left its berth at Luang Prabang and started feeling its way down Route 13. To the south, GM 17 had already walked north to Vang Vieng without incident. There they linked up with the resident FAN garrison, personally led by Kong Le. The Neutralist presence there had grown steadily over the previous year, now totalling three infantry battalions and one commando battalion. Added to these were elements of 4 BP and an artillery battalion salvaged from the PDJ. Continuing slowly north from Vang Vieng, by 25 July this FAR/FAN column was approaching the doorstep of Moung Kassy. Five days later, they eased into the village against no opposition.

To the east, GM 16 had been successfully lifted into Moung Soui. Heading west on the morning of 19 July, the regiment within two days had covered a third of the distance to its target. After that, poor roads and fear of possible communist mines threw the *groupement mobile* behind schedule. Not until 28 July were they one mountain removed from the road intersection.

On the western front, GM 11 was joined by a USAF combat controller and US Army advisor Captain Rod Paschall. Showing good discipline and stamina as it marched east toward Sala Phou Khoun, by 28 July the regiment was also within one hill from the intersection. There they paused in order to coordinate a final assault with GM 16 to the east.

Reproachment between Colonel Vang Pao (right) and Kong Le (second from left) at Sam Thong in April 1963. On the left is FAR personnel officer Captain Bounma Vongprachanh; the following year he attended the French War College. (Photo courtesy Jack Mathews)

Before these FAR troops could claim their prize, a Hmong ADC company on the morning of 29 July was lifted by Air America H-34s onto the high ground overlooking Sala Phou Khoun. At the same time, two Hmong guerrilla companies were airlifted onto Route 13 just south of the junction. At 2100 hours, the three paramilitary companies moved triumphantly onto the abandoned intersection and stole bragging rights from the FAR. The next day, a deflated GM 11 arrived at the crossroads. GM 16 showed up later that afternoon, its commander, Colonel Bounchanh Savatphayphane, livid over the Hmong end-run.

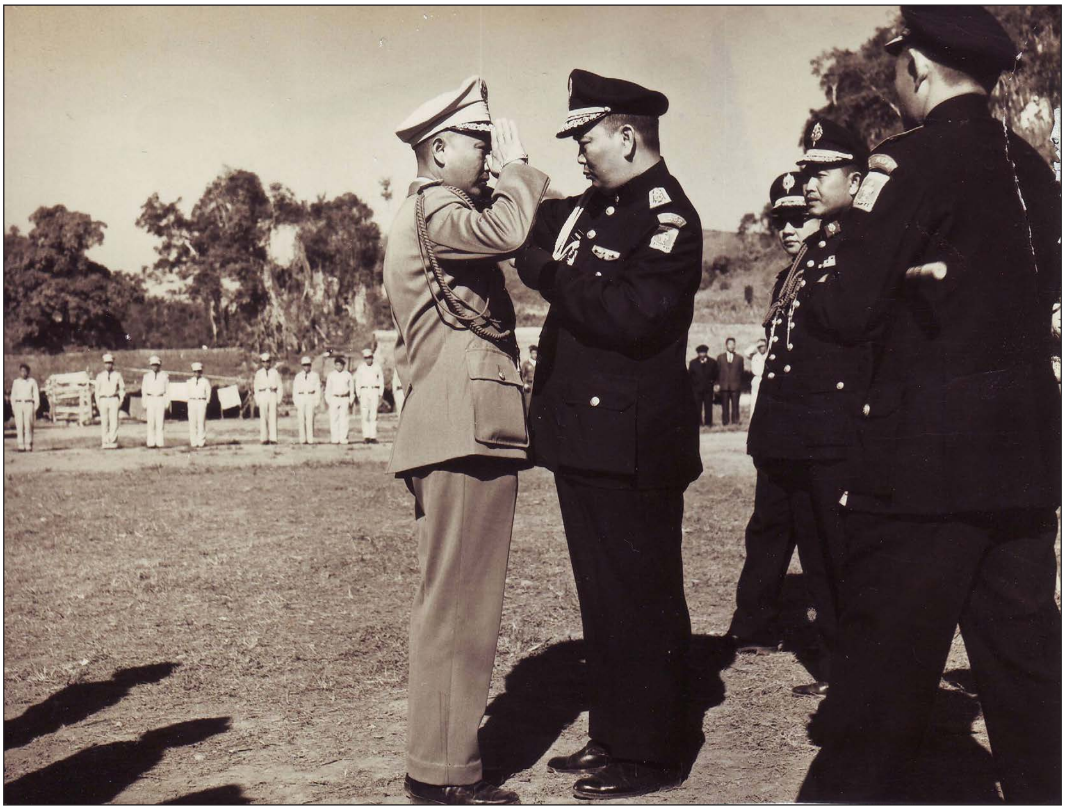
In Vientiane, by contrast, the FAR General Staff was delighted with Triangle's results. By the evening of 30 July, the crossroads had been visited by a jubilant Kouprasith, Vang Pao, and Souvanna Phouma. In its biggest haul to date, government forces had captured six armoured cars, 12 trucks, four 85mm field guns, four 105mm howitzers, and tons of ammunition. Some euphoric generals were even talking about recapturing the entire PDJ.

The Rise of Kouprasith

The action experienced during Operation Triangle was nothing compared to the political combat being waged in the capital. There, in the wake of Siho's April 1964 coup, infighting among the FAR top brass had grown heated. Emerging strong was MR 5 commander Kouprasith and his two main allies: Major General Ouane Rathikoun, rewarded with the title of FAR commander in chief, and Lieutenant Colonel Thonglith Chokbengboun, the hardnosed MR 5 chief of staff who began his military career in the riverine force.

Siho, the coup's mastermind, was left on less certain ground. Outmanoeuvred by Kouprasith in the immediate wake of the coup, he became a magnet for international criticism levelled against excesses by the Lao military. To deflect some of the heat, he changed the name of the DNC that spring to the Lao National Police; similarly, his airborne regiment changed their berets and became known as the Border Police. Retreating to his Phou Khao Khouai redoubt, Siho assumed a low profile for the rest of the year.

A clear loser in the infighting was Phoumi Nosavan. Side-lined during the coup itself, he was barely consulted during that summer's Triangle success. Even his loyal ally, Major General Bounleut, had



Major General Phoumi Nosavan pins the stars of brigadier general on Vang Pao at Sam Thong, late December 1963. Behind Phoumi is Brigadier General Bounpone Marthepharak, Major General Bounleut Sanichanh, and Brigadier General Khamkhong Bouddavong. They wear black dress uniforms with a standing collar, a colour variant favoured by Phoumi during 1962–64. (Author's collection)

suffered, shunted aside in April from being commander in chief to the empty post of FAR Inspector General.

His power base wafting away, Phoumi resisted. Beckoned to his defence were four post-Geneva battalions he had created in violation of the coalition agreement and quietly hidden in the FAR order of battle: two were replacement training battalions, the other two so-called economic battalions. Of the former, one was nearly empty, the other near full strength and posted in Vientiane; the latter units, comprising mostly retired veterans, were posted to Pakse and Thakhek.

On the evening of 4 August 1964, Phoumi passed orders to the Vientiane-based replacement training battalion to stage a coup. The battalion commander – Major Boua, Phoumi's loyal bodyguard – moved into action and erected roadblocks around the town.

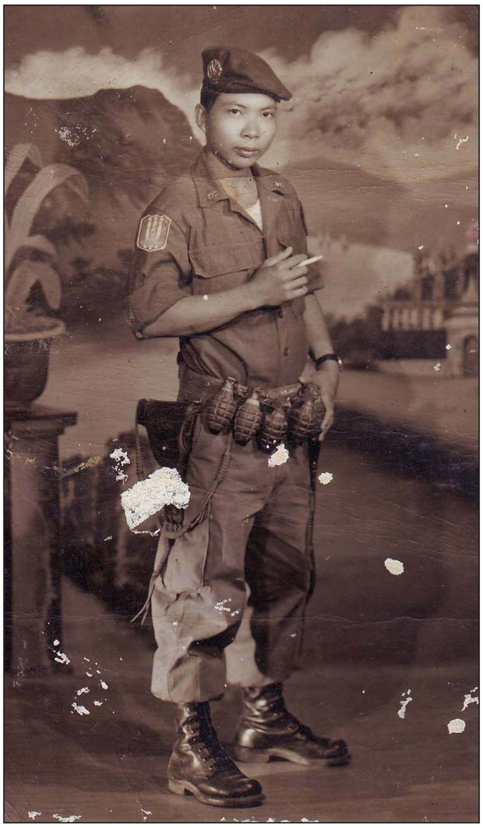
Against this, Kouprasith immediately unleashed his MR 5 forces, smashing the coup attempt almost as soon as it started. Boua was jailed for a few months; both replacement training battalions were disbanded.

Aloof at Phou Khao Khouai, Siho was content to watch Kouprasith and Phoumi snipe at each other. By not calling his paratroopers into play, however, Siho earned the suspicion of the FAR General Staff. To bring an end to interservice squabbles, Souvanna Phouma in mid-January 1965 summoned his generals for a conference in Luang Prabang, during which time he clearly threw in his lot with Kouprasith and Ouane.

At this, Phoumi grew restless. To precipitate a conflict, he sent a desperate plea on 27 January to MR 2 commander Khamkhong, his long-time ally, claiming that MR 5 units were about to attack. Reluctantly, Khamkhong came to the aid of Phoumi, dispatching two companies from Paksane-based GM 13 toward the capital. They were joined by BV 22, commanded by one of FAR's promising young officers, Major Karbkeo Sourisak.

While the Paksane troops were still en route, an unrelated coup attempt began to unfold on 31 January at Wattay. Behind this was Colonel Bounleut Saycocie, a former military attaché in Washington, Fort Leavenworth graduate, and chief of FAR logistics. Disenchanted with Kouprasith – who had been promoted that month to major general – and his growing hold over the FAR General Staff, Bounleut, backed by a trio of companies from GM 17, seized key points around the capital. A handful of his loyalists occupied the radio station and issued five communiques.

Facing dual threats, Kouprasith went on the offensive. Calling on GM 17 – minus the three companies under Bounleut's influence – the general dispatched the regiment against the wayward colonel. Donning orange scarves, GM 17 fanned across Vientiane, easily



As international criticism against the DNC mounted for its involvement in graft, Siho sought to deflect some of the heat in the spring of 1964 by changing its name to the Lao National Police. At the same time, his GMS paratroopers changed their name to Border Police; they kept their unique grey field uniforms but began using FAR red berets with newly-designed police badges. This paratrooper wears the shoulder insignia for Vientiane municipality and shows a particular fondness for Mk 2 pineapple grenades. (Author's collection) bringing the rebels under heel. In a shrewd display of survival tactics, Bounleut merely adopted an orange scarf and declared himself loyal to Kouprasith.

The coup then grew more complicated. General Phoumi, who had just celebrated his birthday, remained in his Vientiane residence to await help from Khamkhong and, he hoped, Siho. The latter, however, was trying hard to maintain an independent position, restricting his Border Police to base until the confusion in the capital was sorted out.

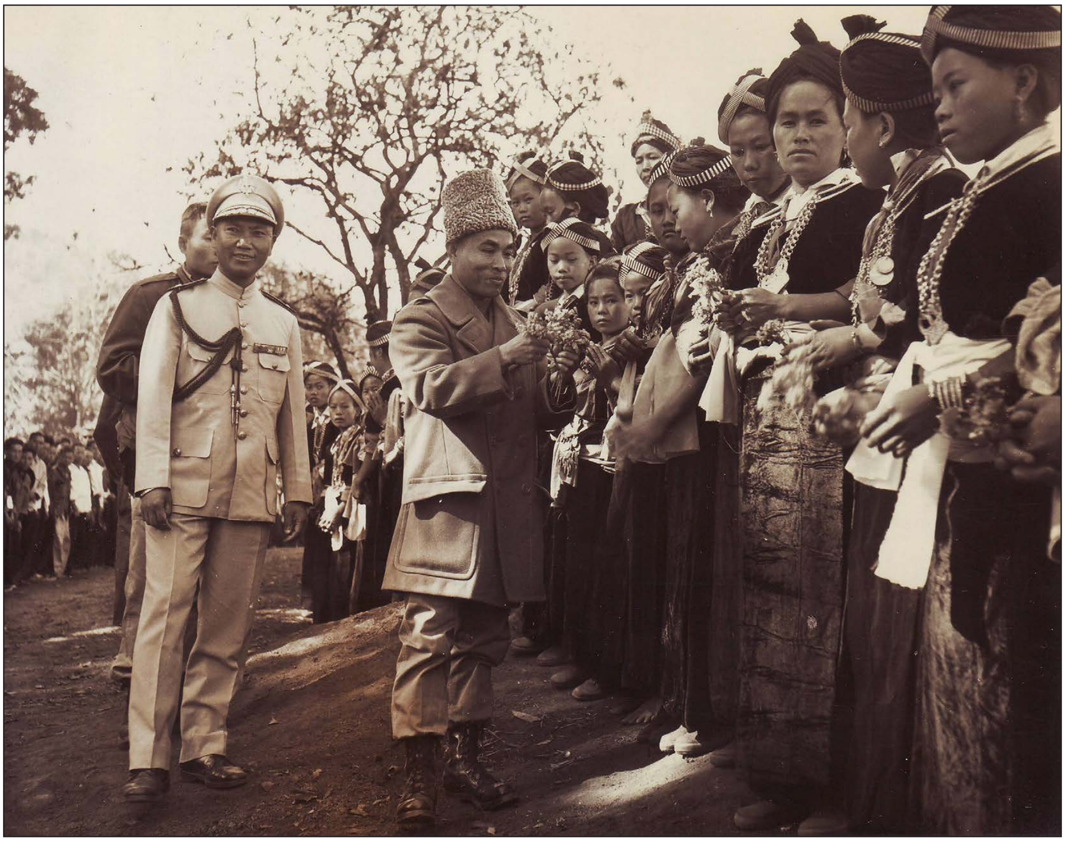
Sensing Siho's hesitation, Kouprasith ruthlessly moved to eliminate his police competitors. On 3 February, his MR 5 armoured forces approached the National Police headquarters at Phone Kheng. At 1300 hours, a volley of 105mm howitzer rounds hit Phone Kheng, setting alight the police documentation room and adjoining parachute supply shed. Shrapnel sprayed the police defensive line, killing two and injuring a Thai PARU advisor. By sundown, FAR forces surrounded the building and bundled off the PARU team to Chinaimo.

With Souvanna Phouma offering firm support, Kouprasith next moved against Kilometre 22, the former Hotfoot training site north of Vientiane now serving as the Border Police headquarters. At the base were BS 11 and 99, the latter equipped with mortars and recoilless rifles. Without clear orders from Siho, neither battalion offered resistance as FAR moved into the camp. All but a single company from BS 11 – which fled to Paksane – were placed under arrest.

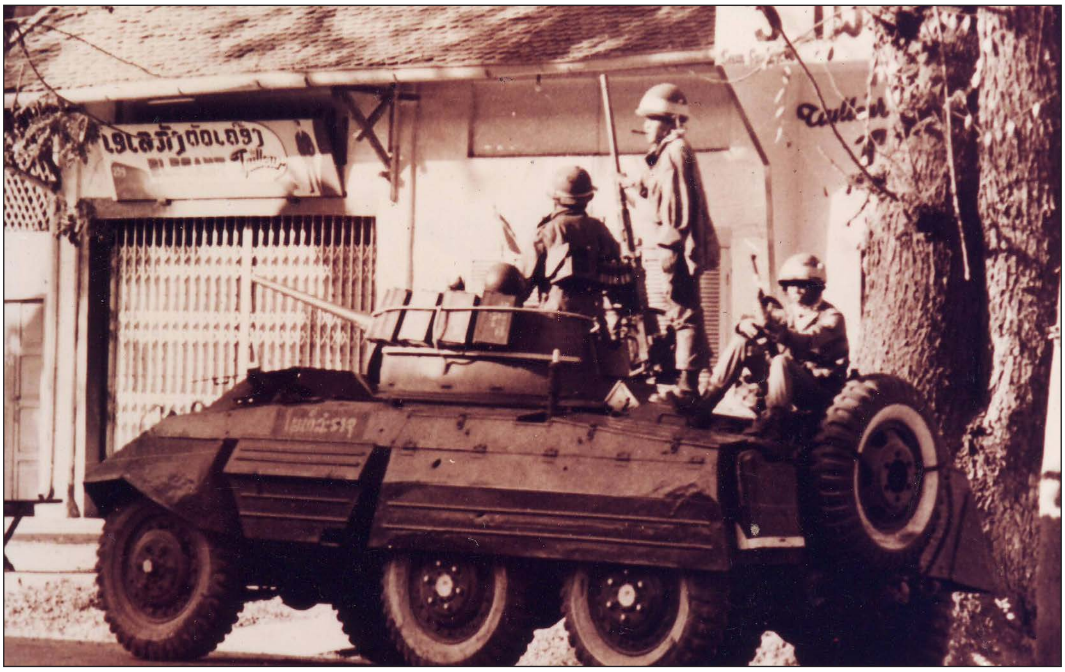
By that late hour, Siho recognised Kouprasith's intentions. Slipping away from his mountain redoubt, he ordered Phou Khao Khouai's two remaining airborne companies to make a last stand. Both companies hailed from the Border Police's premier formation, BS 33. Under the able command of Major Touane Bouddhara, the police paratroopers that evening walked off the massif, crossing 13 kilometres in the direction of the capital.

At first light, the policemen established a string of ambushes along the road. One kilometre farther southwest, a company from BV 52 was ordered to move forward and confront the police. Ambushed, the volunteer troops fell back with casualties. Touane, in turn, occupied the BV 52 position.

At that point, Kouprasith called on the RLAF to bomb BS 33. To this, RLAF commander Thao Ma, a Phoumi ally, radioed excuses



Brigadier General Vang Pao escorts Kong Le during a visit to Sam Thong, circa 1964. Following an August 1963 visit to the Soviet Union, Kong Le took a liking to the *papakha* fur hat popular among senior Soviet military officers. (Author's collection)



An M8 armoured car from Chinaimo patrols the streets of Vientiane during the February 1965 coup that deposed Siho and Phoumi. The word 'Setthathirath' is written on the side, a reference to the revered Lao king of the sixteenth century. It was common FAR practice to name armoured vehicles after prominent Lao historical figures. (Photo courtesy Al Rich Collection, Air America Archives) from the RLAF headquarters in Savannakhet. Improvising, MR 5 forces took an RLAF L-20 Beaver from Wattay and jury-rigged a .50-calibre machine gun in the side door. Buzzing the lightly armed police, the makeshift gunship's inaccurate but intimidating gunfire sent Siho's commandos into retreat.

Returning to Phou Khao Khouai, Touane and his men hid in an adjoining cave network. Meanwhile, Colonel Thonglith, commanding an ad hoc task force of BV 53 and elements of GM 17, rushed to the base of the range. Receiving an ultimatum from Thonglith, Touane surrendered by nightfall.

With the Border Police subdued, there still remained the FAR column slowly approaching Vientiane from Paksane. Before reaching the capital, the GM 13 elements got cold feet and fell back. Karbkeo, however, persisted, motivated in part by a long-standing feud with Thonglith. Crossing the Nam Ngum at night, he led BV 22 to Tha Deua and set fire to its oil depot. Judging further attack futile, Karbkeo withdrew 47 kilometres northeast. There he came under fire from artillery and the same machine gun-equipped Beaver that had plagued Touane, prompting BV 22 to disperse into the jungle north of Paksane.

Back in Vientiane, Generals Kouprasith and Ouane by the morning of 4 February had reason to cheer. Phone Kheng lay in a smouldering heap; in its place would soon be built a new FAR headquarters. Gutted, too, was Phoumi's Vientiane villa. Phoumi himself, after threatening to 'go south to Savannakhet and march north again', instead managed to link up with Siho and steal across the Mekong to exile in Thailand.

The Border Police, held captive for two days on the outskirts of the capital, were airlifted to Seno to form the core of a new FAR airborne regiment, GM 21, to be commanded by ex-Border Police commander Thao Ly. The rest of Siho's National Police were placed back under the Ministry of Interior.

Although Siho's police empire had been crushed, aftershocks were felt for months. First, the victorious Kouprasith gained the extra hat as FAR deputy commander. Also named as a FAR deputy commander was Major General Bounpone, who was given this added title when his post of Surface Defence commander was abolished. Meantime, two prominent Phoumists, General Lamngeum of MR 3 and Ground Forces commander Sang, were forced to resign; Sang's post was subsequently abolished, while MR 3 command was given to the unimpressive Nam Tha veteran, General La Pathammavong. Major General Khamkhong, head of MR 2, was also forced to resign; to add insult to injury, after the command of MR 2 was passed to Brigadier General Vang Pao on 28 February, Khamkhong was placed under house arrest in Luang Prabang, then in 1968 belatedly sentenced to five years in jail for sending his troops toward Vientiane.

As further retribution, Kouprasith carved off Borikhane Province from MR 2 and absorbed it into his own MR 5. The MR 2 headquarters, previously at Paksane, was moved up to Sam Thong, close to Vang Pao's Long Tieng guerrilla bastion. Finally, GM 13 was given a new set of officers to wipe away Khamkhong's influence.

Despite these changes, Phoumi supporters in the army were far from finished. On 26 March, the two Thakhek-based regiments – GM 12 under Colonel Khamsy Sayarath and GM 14 under Colonel Sipraseurth Saycocie – unleashed a hostile radio barrage against Vientiane. In response, the FAR General Staff two days later dispatched GMs 15 and 18 to Thakhek, both of which quietly quelled the dissent. GM 12 was subsequently given a new commander, Lieutenant Colonel Ratanabanlang Choumpholphakdy, while GM 14 was given a sweeping officer change and redesignated as GM 19. The bulk of offending officers from both regiments fled to Thailand.

Three weeks later, another anti-Vientiane revolt broke out at Paksane, where Karbkeo and his renegade BV 22 were still lurking in the surrounding jungle. Karbkeo had since been joined by Colonel Khamsao, the Sam Neua subdivision commander who had left his post in February to aid pro-Phoumi forces, and BR 290.

GM 17 was dispatched from Vientiane to deal with this latest threat, taking the surrender of BR 290 and forcing Khamsao into Thai exile. BV 22 was dealt with more forcefully, with Karbkeo executed as he attempted surrender; of the battalion's remaining men, 360 deserted, leaving just 153 on the FAR payroll. GM 17 subsequently kept some of its units at Paksane to ensure that the town remained under MR 5's thumb.

Siho, for his part, would ultimately return to Laos. On the advice of a fortune teller, he recrossed the Mekong in June 1966 and surrendered to MR 4 commander Phasouk in Pakse. Handed over to Kouprasith, Siho was detained at his former Phou Khao Khouai stronghold. There he stayed for three months before – so the story goes – being shot while trying to escape.

4

SECOND FIDDLE

Prior to the establishment of the coalition government in 1962, CIA-supported Hmong guerrilla formations had mushroomed across MR 2. Paralleling this paramilitary activity, the FAR had also taken an interest in the region. At the forefront of its efforts were three BVs created in 1962 in northeast Xieng Khouang Province. These battalions traced their roots back to the original Sam Neua-based BV 23, which had been crushed when the Pathet Lao seized most of the province shortly after the Kong Le coup. Stragglers from that unit, led by Major Khamsao Keovilay, had made their way south to the village of Hua Moung, midway to the PDJ. These remnants received fresh FAR recruits, allowing them to divide in three and become the nucleus for a trio of new BVs. By June 1962, all three were coming to strength: BV 26 in the hills around communist-held Moung Peun; BV 27, under Major Khamsao, at Hua Moung; and, farther south, BV 28. In reward for his perseverance, Khamsao was also named Sam Neua military subdivision commander and deputy governor of the province (the RLG maintained the fiction of a fully-functional provincial administration in Sam Neua, even though most of the province was under the communist thumb).

During the summer of 1963, these battalions were ordered to move north. Joining them was a fourth FAR unit, BR 240. Created in April 1961 in part from lowland Lao and in part from Hmong, command of BR 240 by mid-1963 was held by Major Ly Sao, a short-tempered but promising Hmong officer whose sister was Vang Pao's second wife.

Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma visits FAN units in MR 2, 1965. Kong Le is wearing a Soviet army *papakha* fur hat. In the background shaking hands is FAR commander Ouane Rathikoun. (Author's collection)

While Vang Pao's main focus was on his Hmong guerrillas, he fully encouraged the modest expansion of FAR forces in Sam Neua. Instrumental in this was Lieutenant Colonel Thong Vongrassamay, commander of BV 26, who in late 1963 had started a recruitment drive in the mountains north of Sam Neua town.

Fast forward one year, and politics in Vientiane began to have a detrimental impact on the FAR presence in Sam Neua. In particular, many BV 27 officers were exceedingly loyal to Phoumi Nosavan. After Phoumi was side-lined after the April 1964 coup, these officers threw their support behind MR 2 commander Khamkhong, himself a Phoumist and also under pressure from Kouprasith. Quietly, BV 27 commander Khamsao and a good portion of FAR officers at Hua Moung disappeared in January 1965, resurfacing at the MR 2 headquarters in Paksane. They would ultimately be drummed out of the FAR.

Six months later, the FAR presence in MR 2 received another major setback. Lieutenant Colonel Thong, who was aboard an Air America H-34 during a search-and-rescue mission, was hit by groundfire in the stomach. Although rushed for surgery at a Korat hospital, he succumbed to his wounds five days later. An elaborate cremation ceremony was conducted at MR 2's Sam Thong headquarters, with US Ambassador to Laos William Sullivan flying up for the event and pinning a Silver Star to the colonel's chest before the body was committed to flames.

Thong left huge shoes to fill. Not only was he the BV 26 commander and had taken over as head of the Sam Neua military subdivision after Khamsao, but he was also acting governor of Sam Neua Province. The man chosen for the job was Lieutenant Colonel Phan Siharat, an energetic and promising FAR officer from Paksane.

With Phan new to the scene, MR 2 commander Vang Pao was looking to stage a rainy season offensive. This kicked off on 5 July 1965, with the campaign staging from RLG outposts along the Sam Neua-Xieng Khouang border. In addition to the FAR units organic to MR 2, he had taken temporary loan of two FAR infantry battalions from outside the region. With these he saw modest success, using artillery, airpower, and heliborne troops to retake Hua Moung during August against little opposition.

By year's end, the approaching dry season normally ushered in a period of heightened communist activity across MR 2. This came at an especially inconvenient time, as the King of Laos was scheduled to visit Long Tieng in January 1966 to celebrate the Hmong New Year. As a gift for the King, Vang Pao had hatched an ambitious plan to liberate the Xieng Khouang provincial capital, Xieng Khouangville.

Pressed for time before the King's arrival, Vang Pao looked to reinforce the area around the hilltop village of Ban Peung as a springboard to hit Xieng Khouangville. A 105mm howitzer was lifted in, as was a Thai PARU advisory team. FAR too got into the action, deploying elements of GM 13 from Tha Thom for a linkup.

Slowly, the operation began to make headway. Touring the front on 16 December, Vang Pao landed at the howitzer position and was greeted by Colonel Khamphat Phankham, the GM 13 commander. Discussing strategy through the afternoon, Vang Pao then departed for Long Tieng. That night, North Vietnamese-led forces circled behind the hilltop and struck the government front line. Khamphat was taken prisoner and later died in captivity.

Despite this major setback, Vang Pao tried to restart efforts from Ban Peung. RLG forces, however, refused to advance. During the second week of February 1966, a renewed North Vietnamese attack sent elements of GM 13 falling south to Tha Thom. On that note, Vang Pao's ambitious stab toward Xieng Khouangville was brought to a close.

Dry Season Losses

As the weather turned hot and dry, the communists surged in MR 2 during the first quarter of 1966. Like the previous year, the North Vietnamese Army dominated combat, relegating the Pathet Lao to a supporting role.

Looking to blunt the communist advance was a mix of FAR and Hmong guerrillas. Among the first to feel the pressure was BV 27 at Houei Thom, which was knocked backward toward the large RLG outpost at Nakhang. There they linked up with BV 26 under Lieutenant Colonel Phan, as well as the newly-arrived BR 240.

At Nakhang, the North Vietnamese offered the defenders no reprieve. Unfortunately for Vang Pao, the FAR General Staff showed little interest in rushing in more reinforcements. This demonstrated what was fast becoming a bedrock reality of the Lao National Army: while the GMs were theoretically available for nationwide deployment, MR commanders jealously hoarded the units stationed within their jurisdictions.

As pressure persisted, Nakhang's civilian population by 12 February had largely disappeared, some heading southwest, others walking northwest toward the FAN outpost at Moung Hiem. Only BV 26, the weary BV 27 remnants, and a Thai PARU advisory team remained to hold the fort.

Against these defenders, PAVN dispatched the 5th Battalion/148th Infantry Regiment. By 17 February, the battalion was at the gates of

In late April 1965, Kong Le (second from right) went to Indonesia as a special guest of the Indonesian military for an entire month. Here he is being greeted by the Indonesian Army chief, General Achmad Yani. His escort, Colonel Widjono Soejono (right), was a former chief of staff of the Indonesian Army Para-Commando Regiment. Kong Le is wearing Indonesian Army parachute wings following a visit to the Para-Commando Training Centre at Batu Jajar. His visit was largely incident-free, with one exception: Indonesia provided their Lao guest with a vehicle adorned with a two-star flag befitting a major general, but Kong Le repeatedly complained because FAR/FAN major generals used three stars in line with French rank structure. (Photo courtesy Widjono Soejono)

Nakhang, where it linked up with several Vietnamese companies already on the scene and attacked at dawn. Keeping the communists at bay with a 75mm pack howitzer, the FAR troops gave no ground through late afternoon. Still, Ambassador Sullivan ordered all US advisors to evacuate to a cave-bunker overlooking Moung Hiem during evening hours.

To everyone's surprise, Colonel Phan and his men lasted the night. By 0900 hours the next morning, American advisors returned to the site. That noon, Vang Pao arrived to personally command the defences. A sniper's bullet found its mark, however, seriously wounding the Hmong general and forcing his emergency evacuation to Thailand.

That night, all US advisors were again ordered to vacate Nakhang during the evening hours. With Vang Pao wounded, morale at the garrison was at rock bottom. This, combined with a mortar barrage that ignited the ammunition dump beside the runway, started a slow haemorrhage of FAR troops toward Moung Hiem. By the time two USAF AC-47 gunships arrived overhead in support, Nakhang had already been abandoned.

With the fall of Nakhang, the RLG was fast running out of options in northern Xieng Khouang Province. Moung Hiem, by default, became one of the few secure regrouping points where Colonel Phan could lead his Nakhang remnants. To Phan's disappointment, however, the Moung Hiem garrison, consisting of the Neutralist BI 5, offered his men a frosty welcome. The camp commander, Tiao Sisouvanh Souvannarath, was a nephew of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and a lieutenant colonel in Kong Le's FAN. (He was also the brother of Major Ekarath, who had been murdered by Siho in 1961.) Sisouvath had established the Moung Hiem garrison in early 1961 as a FAN island in a sea of competing Royalist and communist forces. By adhering to an unspoken nonaggression pact with the communists, he had enabled Moung Hiem to be spared the harsh treatment dished out to nearby RLG garrisons; by offering refuge to Phan's men, Sisouvanh feared he would be irrevocably altering the status quo and thereby exposing himself to communist repercussions.

In August 1965, Indonesia accepted 129 FAN officers and other ranks for training. After one month of Indonesian language instruction, and a two-month delay due to political upheaval in Jakarta, the contingent graduated from airborne and commando courses in April 1966. This FAN NCO (centre) poses with Indonesian paratroopers in Bandung in late 1965. They wear Indonesian-made copies of the US M1942 camouflage coverall; all FAN students subsequently returned to Laos in this attire. (Photo courtesy Soui Sananikone)

Despite FAN opposition, Phan ordered his followers to pitch tents along Moung Hiem's runway directly opposite the Neutralist camp. At this, Sisouvanh offered a strong protest, erecting a banner over his fort reading 'Not Welcome.' Said Mike Lynch, one of the Vang Pao's CIA advisors holed up in the bunker overlooking the site: 'It was an uneasy truce. On the one hand there were the ragged remnants of Vang Pao's forces. On the other hand there were the Neutralists in their sharp, new uniforms (courtesy of Indonesia) who we could observe marching and drilling on the airfield.'

On 8 March, the North Vietnamese probed Moung Hiem with a dusk mortar attack. Realising he could not count on FAN for a spirited defence, Phan ordered his men to begin moving southeast in the direction of Nakhang under the assumption that the communists would least expect a withdrawal in that direction. As the Royalists left, the Neutralists were again alone, save for a Thai PARU advisory team still camped on the side of the airstrip.

For three days, Moung Hiem remained in peace. Then at midnight on 11 March, elements of two North Vietnamese battalions rushed the perimeter. Hitting from the north, the Vietnamese zeroed in on the FAN command post. Sisouvanh's past history of coexistence counted for little as the communists executed him and his top two officers. The resident BI 5 crumbled, with many of its men killed and others pragmatically pledging their support for the communist cause. Moung Hiem was then razed to the last hut.

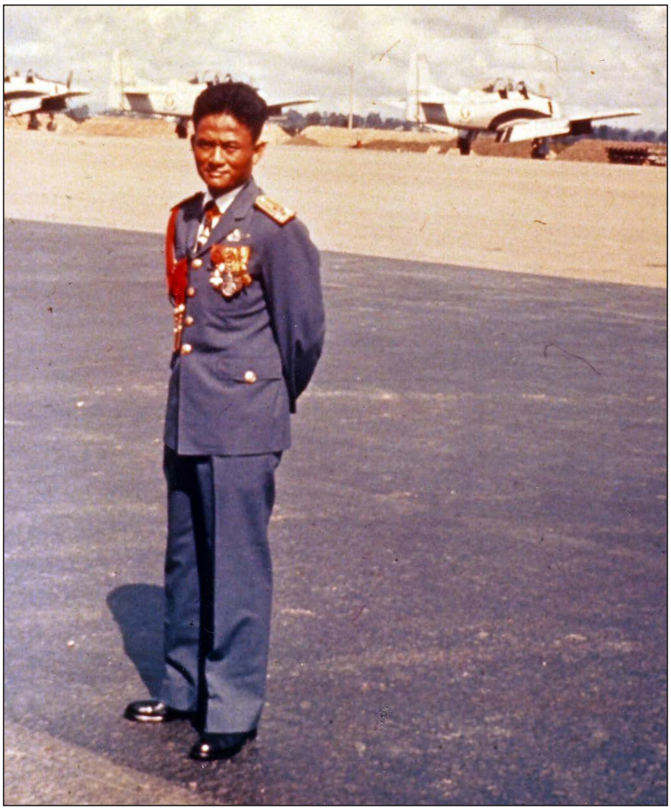
Briefed on what was perhaps the most brutal communist attack to that date, Souvanna Phouma demanded that his nephew's body be recovered. Phan dodged the order – at least for the moment – unwilling to challenge the dense communist task force lingering around the smouldering site. (Later that year, RLG forces moved back into Moung Hiem and found the fort littered with bleached skeletons. Lieutenant Colonel Sisouvanh's remains, identified by rank insignia affixed to his uniform, were flown back to Vientiane.)

Moung Hiem would prove the last major engagement before the communists eased off ahead of the monsoons. By that time, Vang Pao had recovered and settled back into his headquarters at Long Tieng. There he wasted no time before launching his 1966 rainy season offensive. In a major contrast to the previous year, however, the general's manoeuvre forces this time were not dominated by FAR troops, but rather by his CIA-sponsored irregular troops. This was due to a combination of factors: attrition in MR 2's own FAR volunteer battalions, an unwillingness on the part of FAR commanders outside the region to lend their men to MR 2, and Vang Pao's own increased confidence in the abilities of his rapidly growing guerrilla forces. Thus, much like the Pathet Lao were reduced to playing second fiddle to North Vietnamese forces, the FAR from that point forward played only a supporting role during the pivotal battles that would rock MR 2 over the coming half-decade.

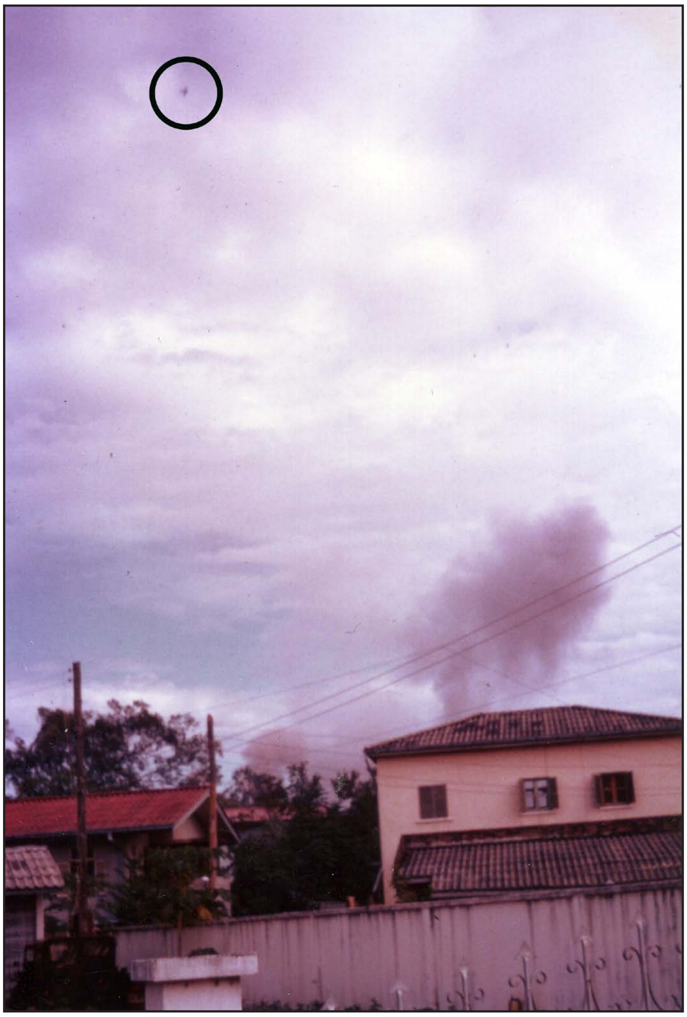
Northerners Versus Southerners

Vang Pao was not the only general with rainy season plans. In MR 1, the top brass had conjured Operation Prasone ('Sacred Arrow'), a major FAR clearing operation in the Nambac valley. Abandoned by the Lao army since early 1961, Nambac was now the target of the largest FAR rainy season sweep since 1964's Triangle. Beginning on 23 July 1966, Thakhek's GM 19, joining forces with five volunteer battalions and the Luang Prabang-based GM 11, moved into the valley. By 7 August, their target was declared secure.

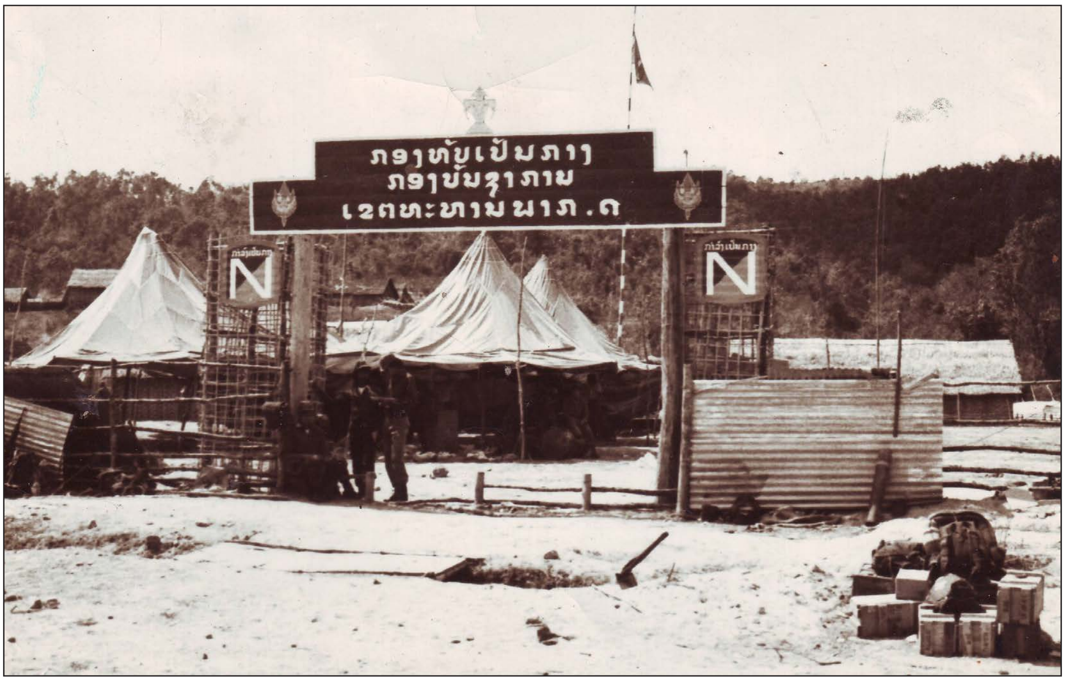
As welcome as this success was, it was somewhat sullied by a brewing conflict between RLAF commander Thao Ma and several Vientiane-based generals. Though their feud had several dimensions, one schism was based on geography: natives of the panhandle – like Thao Ma and Phoumi – had long been predisposed against northerners like Generals Ouane and Kouprasith (who originally hailed from the south, but now had his powerbase firmly in the capital).



Brigadier General Thao Ma in a blue service uniform at Wattay for Armed Forces Day, March 1966. Beginning in 1965, Ma instituted a blue RLAF service uniform with a black tie. (Photo courtesy William Keeler)



An RLAF T-28 bombs Vientiane during the Thao Ma coup attempt of 21 October 1966. (Photo courtesy Charlie Jones)



FAN's Moung Hiem outpost in MR 2, early 1966. The home to FAN's BI 5, the site was razed by North Vietnamese troops in March 1966. The 'N' on the gate denoted their Neutralist orientation; a similar 'N' design was used as a FAN shoulder insignia beginning in September 1962. (Photo courtesy Manit Bhisitcharoentat)

Constantly rebelling against directives from the FAR General Staff, Thao Ma had been browbeat into shifting his T-28 fleet to Luang Prabang in support of Operation Prasone. But as soon as he could, he and his pilots had retreated back to the RLAF headquarters in Savannakhet. There, he had wasted no time planning yet another rebellion, this time with Colonels Nouphet Daoheuang and Thao Ly, fellow southerners and the heads of GMs 18 and 21, respectively. Nouphet and Thao Ma were especially tight, having been close friends and classmates in OCS. Their conspiring took on a new sense of urgency in early October when the FAR General Staff announced plans to dilute Thao Ma's power by shifting him to Vientiane and giving him a desk job.

The end result from all this was that Thao Ma finally staged a coup d'état in late October. Though his T-28s staged surprise bombing runs on the capital, promised ground support from Nouphet and Thao Ly never materialised. Failing to gain momentum, Thao Ma and his loyal T-28 pilots were forced into Thai exile.

Thao Ma was not the only Lao general to see his star fall in October 1966. Two days before the failed RLAF putsch, Major General Kong Le was sent packing to Thailand. There he tried to get the RTG to support him in exile; failing that, he headed for Indonesia.

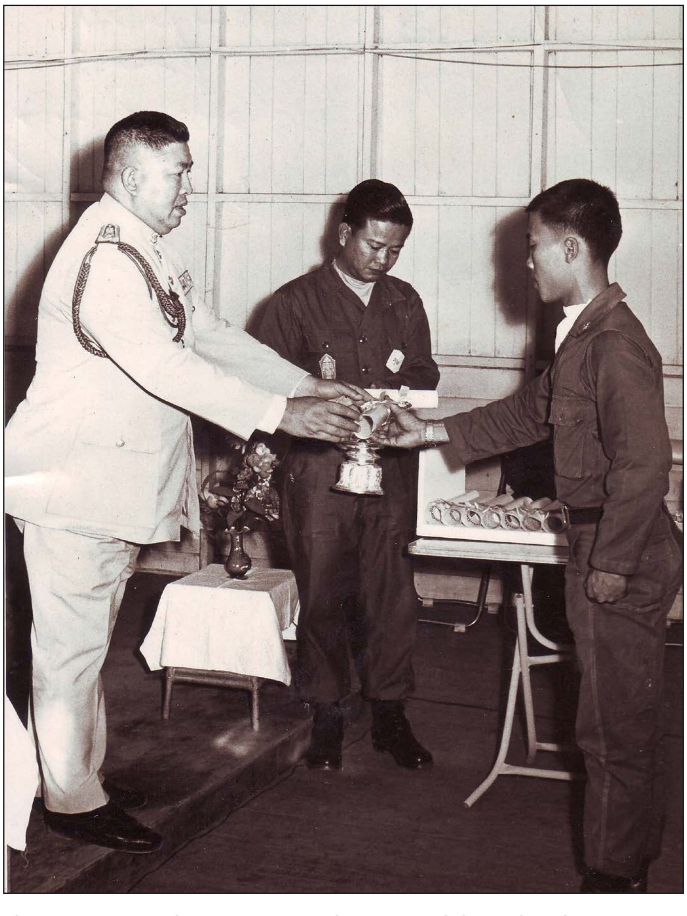
Kong Le's troubles were long in coming. Ever since being pushed off the PDJ in May 1964, he had been battling to keep his Neutralists relevant in the fast-polarising Lao political spectrum. As far as the FAR generals were concerned, they were growing tired of an independent FAN that demanded equality despite its growing qualitative and quantitative shortcomings.

Among foreign nations, too, few countries saw benefit in extending FAN a helping hand. (Exceptions existed. In August 1965, for example, Indonesia agreed to give para-commando training to 129 FAN officers and other ranks. To offset Indonesian influence, the US agreed to refit FAN's artillery group in Moung Soui with newer 4.2-inch mortars and 105mm howitzers.)

Even within Kong Le's own FAN, a generational battle was brewing between veterans of 2 BP and the newer breed of Neutralist officers who did not automatically defer to Kong Le; internal squabbling, as a result, was increasing in both frequency and intensity.

By January 1966, FAN was reaching the breaking point. That month the Moung Soui-based BI 14 revolted, largely because of discontent over Kong Le's lack of leadership. Two months later, BI 8 mutinied, while a third battalion threatened to do likewise. The iron-fisted Moung Soui garrison commander, Colonel Sing Chanthakoumane, was forced to take loan of a battalion from Vang Vieng to shore up his sagging defences.

Seeing his army fast spinning out of control, Kong Le implemented steps to rectify the situation. First, to appease at least one of his more powerful officers, he announced plans in early August to make Colonel Soulivanh Singhavara – FAN chief of staff



The FAR commander, Major General Ouane Rathikoun, hands out diplomas to the 30 graduates of the first command and staff course run at Long Tieng, early 1966. Ten RTA officers – among them, future prime minister Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh – arrived at Long Tieng in mid-1965 to run the 32-week course. FAR also had a Staff School (*École d'état-major*) at Phone Kheng that graduated nine intakes before closing in 1972 due to budgetary reasons. The FAR officer in the rear of this photograph wears the insignia issued to staff course graduates; the design was a virtual copy of the RTA Command and Staff School badge, except the single Thai elephant was replaced by an erawan. (Author's collection)

In 1970, the US supplied FAR with 15 Cadillac Gage M706 armoured cars. This M706 with twin .30-calibre machine guns in its turret is participating in the Armed Forces Day parade, March 1972. The vehicle's camouflage pattern was unique to the 2nd Recce Squadron in Vientiane. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)

and deputy commander at Vang Vieng – head of the first Neutralist *groupement mobile*. During the same month, he ordered BI 8, with a new commander, to stage the latest in a series of attempts to occupy the mountains north of Moung Soui.

Again, the mountain foray came up short. As a result, Kong Le's standing among his peers sank to a new low. At the same time, the FAR General Staff was stoking internal FAN dissent, lending words of encouragement to some of the more assertive Neutralist colonels. By October 1966, with sentiment against him having reached a climax, Kong Le left the kingdom.

As the number of Lao generals dropped by two, that of US military advisors was rising exponentially. There already existed the RO, which oversaw distribution of military equipment. The US had also formed the office of the Deputy Chief (DepChief) Joint US Military Assistance Group Thailand (JUSMAG). Commanded by a US Army colonel, the DepChief office operated out of Bangkok and coordinated overseas training and the delivery of military equipment to Laos for distribution by the RO.

In addition, ever since Operation Triangle in 1964, the US had been sending in small numbers of army and air force advisors to work directly with the FAR and RLAF. As an ad hoc solution, nearly all these personnel had been treated as temporary-duty augmentees to the army attaché or air attaché offices, thereby limiting their tours to six months.

By early 1966, this relatively small number of advisors was found insufficient to oversee escalating US military assistance to Laos. Moreover, six-month tours were deemed too short for advisors to fully grasp the idiosyncrasies of Laos. As a remedy, the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 5 May 1966 approved creation of Project 404. Funded through the DepChief in Bangkok, Project 404 was crafted as an administrative umbrella for permanently assigned US military personnel augmenting the attaché staffs. In this way, the array of air force and army advisors who had been serving six-month tours in Laos for the past two years would now be eligible for longer tours. Salaries would be handled through DepChief, while operational control was wielded by either the army attaché or air attaché.

In mid-1966, the first Project 404 package – totalling 117 military advisors and five Department of Defense civilians – was approved for Laos. Drawing 70 percent from the US Army and the remainder from the USAF, Project 404 divided its personnel among RLAF bases and MR headquarters across Laos. Duties included assistance in targeting, communications, intelligence, and coordination of regional air support requirements. During October, Project 404 was further expanded to encompass a USAF Forward Air Controller (FAC) program; these would later be known as Raven FACs.

5

MISPLACED CONFIDENCE

MR 2 was not the only region experiencing a surge in fighting. Down in MR 4, the military region commander, General Phasouk, in late 1966 looked to counter communist inroads around the Bolovens Plateau. At his disposal was GM 16, led by Lieutenant Colonel Soutchay Vongsavanh, and GM 21, Thao Ly's airborne regiment on loan from Seno. Beginning on 15 January 1967, both regiments joined forces in Operation Thevathat, a sweep eastward toward the town of Lao Ngam. Within days, Lao Ngam was easily secured, the FAR victory being marred only by a truck accident that claimed the lives of half a dozen GM 21 officers.

By March 1967, both FAR GMs left the vicinity, being replaced by two newly created FAN regiments – GMs 802 and 804 under Lieutenant Colonels Sing Chanthakoumane and Khamko Namuangnong, respectively – shipped down from Moung Soui. On 13 April, the Neutralists resumed sweeps in the area under Operation Thevathat II.

With communist resistance noticeably heavier, fighting at Lao Ngam raged into the summer. By October, North Vietnam raised the stakes by dispatching an infantry battalion, the 292nd, to the Lao Ngam front. The FAN managed to battle back, however, retaining a toehold in the town through year's end.

Far more ambitious were the FAR manoeuvres in MR 1. Following from the gains during 1966's Operation Prasone, the FAR General Staff, noting that Nambac stood along the traditional invasion route toward Luang Prabang, shirked conventional wisdom and insisted on holding the Nambac valley into the dry season beginning at year's end.

Chosen to head the valley's defence was the original commander of GM 16, Colonel Bounchanh Savatphayphane, since appointed as deputy commander (under General Ouane) of GT Nord. Bounchanh, in turn, assigned Colonel Khampai Sayasith, the head of GM 11, as the Nambac field commander.

On Sayasith's watch, FAR in early 1967 attempted to expand its hold beyond the valley. A strong communist response, however, halted forward movement and prompted Vientiane to scrape together reinforcements. By mid-1967, two embryonic *groupements mobiles* were added to the valley. The first, GM 27 from Champassac, comprised BIs 35 and 36. The second, GM 25 from Sayaboury, consisted of BIs 39 and 40. Both units were heavily blooded during June and July as they inched their way east, then south. As further reinforcement, GM 12 on 2 August began movement to Nambac. Commanded by Colonel Ratanabanlang Choumpholphakdy, GM 12 under different leadership had participated in the abortive 1965 Thakhek uprising; some southern officers suspected that its deployment to Nambac was because of long memories among the General Staff.

Despite the influx of fresh troops and the onset of monsoon rains, communist pressure around Nambac remained strong. On 14 August 1967, BI 36 was mauled 14 kilometres to the northeast. Then on the last day of the month, a T-28 accidentally bombed FAR troops 11 kilometres to the south. The resultant distrust from this accident, plus a pair of North Vietnamese commando attacks on the Luang Prabang airfield, seriously impacted the provision of close air support.

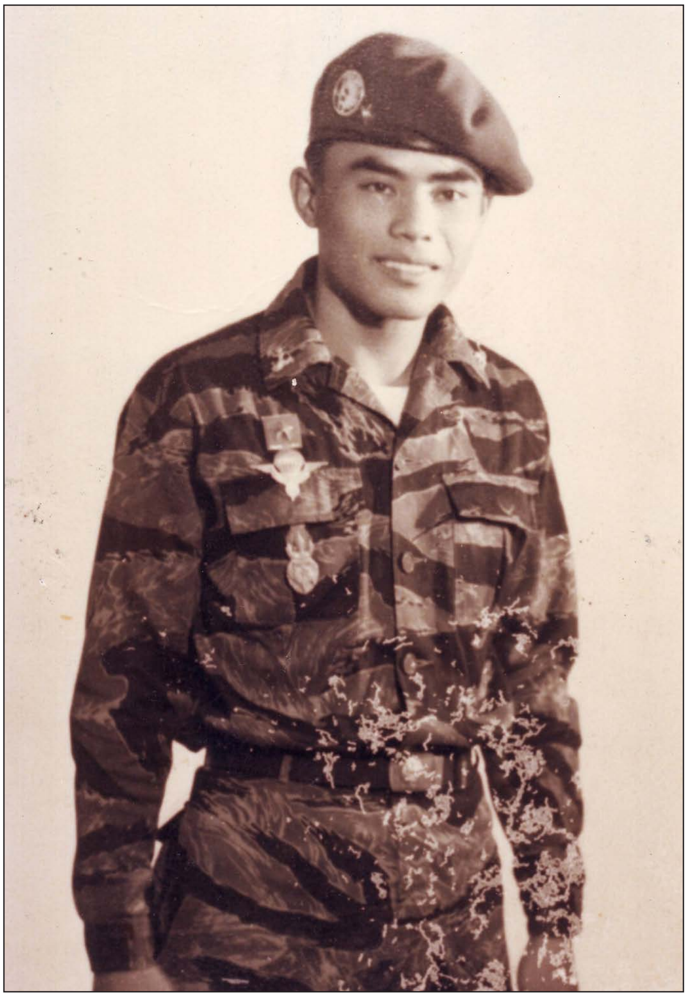
In September, Nambac absorbed yet more reinforcements. First to come was 55 BP, then 1 BP, the latter fresh from retraining at Pranburi, Thailand. (In March 1967, Project 007 shifted from Lopburi to the RTA Infantry Centre at Pranburi, whereupon it was renamed Project 009.) Soon followed by the rest of Colonel Tiao Monivong Kindavong's GM 15, the paratroopers pushed 11 kilometres southeast along the bank of the Nambac River and set up positions.

By October, the monsoon rains were sputtering to a close. Sensing that the upcoming dry season could be a turning point in the war if it could consolidate monsoon season gains, the FAR General Staff ordered the Nambac garrison to begin new offensive actions east toward the MR 2 border. As government forces surged forth on 7 October, however, Vietnamese troops hit GM 15 on the southeast front, sending it falling back in disarray.

As it turned out, these were the least of Colonel Bounchanh's headaches. In particular, he had yet to come up with an overall tactical plan. And with his 7,500 troops (including 3,000 CIA-sponsored irregulars) facing 4,100 communist soldiers, Bounchanh's two-to-one numerical advantage was deemed inadequate for anything but limited offensive probes. Indeed, apart from two short-lived guerrilla gains in November, FAR had failed to extend the front line.

With MR 1 needing help, Vang Pao – in a move smacking of prudent diplomacy – ordered an MR 2 Hmong task force to move west, with the intent to rendezvous with a FAR column heading east from Nambac toward the village of Moung Ngoi. On 10 November, Vang Pao began airlifting guerrillas for what was being called Operation Link Up. Within 15 days, they had crossed 47 kilometres.

As Operation Link Up made progress, the dry season arrived in northern Laos. Taking advantage of the favourable weather, the North Vietnamese Politburo early in December ordered the entire 316th Infantry Division and elements of the 335th Independent Regiment to the Nambac front. With the arrival of these troops, communist pressure took an expanding toll on the Nambac defenders. In December alone, 42 FAR troops were killed and 72 wounded.



Second Lieutenant Khampeu Nobouphasavanh, June 1967. He wears the Tadpole Sparce variant of tiger striped camouflage procured from South Vietnam. A FAR airborne officer, Khampeu wears a red beret with winged-dagger airborne badge, *hanuman* (monkey god) collar device for parachutists, and Lao basic wings. On his right pocket is the insignia of the military academy at Chinaimo. (Photo courtesy Khampeu Nobouphasavanh)

In response, the FAR General Staff restructured the valley's defences. GM 15, backed by GM 11 and two 105mm howitzers, was strung across the southeast perimeter, while GM 12 was positioned to the northeast and two more infantry battalions remained inside the valley. Then beginning 20 December, a large-scale resupply of the valley was initiated.

To further boost the Nambac front, a call went out for more reinforcements. Asked to contribute GM 16, General Phasouk refused. As a token gesture, FAN offered its Moung Soui-based BV 2, which was lifted to Luang Prabang, then choppered to defensive positions 31 kilometres south of Nambac.

As the Nambac defences were being augmented, Vang Pao increased his Operation Link Up contribution to include an entire guerrilla battalion. As this battalion pressed west, GM 15 was loaded aboard RLAF H-34s and shuttled east. There it rendezvoused with an advance party of Hmong guerrillas and together moved into Moung Ngoi.

Back in the Nambac valley, the FAR defences were rapidly unravelling. By the end of the first week of January, communist forces, wielding a single 82mm mortar, were able to close the airfield.

JUNGLE DRUM
"LA DISCIPLINE TRANSFORME L'HOMME EN SOLDAT"
"LE COURAGE TRANSFORME LE SOLDAT EN HEROS"

The gate to the FAN artillery ammunition storage compound at Moung Soui, circa 1968. (Author's collection)

The Royalist troops, unwilling to patrol outside their defensive perimeter, allowed themselves to be subjected to continuous harassment mortar fire. Unable to use the runway, Air America C-123Ks soon appeared overhead, dropping much-needed supply pallets to the beleaguered garrison.

Worse for the defenders, when the Vietnamese hauled some heavy machine guns and more mortars to a hill overlooking the Nambac valley, standard tactical air ordnance proved unable to silence the weapons. The US Embassy, moreover, scuttled efforts to use napalm on account of the number of friendly forces in the vicinity. In desperation, the Luang Prabang T-28 commander loaded empty napalm canisters with aviation fuel and slung them on his seven available aircraft. Dropping the canisters over the hillside, the fighter pilots let the fuel soak the slope before igniting it with white phosphorus rockets and .50-calibre machine guns. The North Vietnamese heavy weapons temporarily fell silent.

Not to lose momentum, North Vietnam struck back on 11 January with a series of diversionary commando attacks along the northern outskirts of Luang Prabang. Forty-eight hours later, the 316th Division's 148th Regiment began a full-scale assault against GM 12 positions in the hills north of the Nambac valley, while a battalion from the 335th Independent Regiment moved in from the west.

Just as the North Vietnamese were shifting into high gear, the FAR defensive line was in flux. Belatedly realising the vulnerability of his valley command post alongside the runway, Colonel Bounchanh – who had personally moved up from Luang Prabang to take charge – ordered the FAR headquarters and two 105mm howitzers shifted to a hilltop village three kilometres northwest. Air America C-123s, not yet informed of the move, continued to drop pallets into the now-deserted valley.

Back in Vientiane, an eleventh-hour call was aired across the kingdom for yet another wave of reinforcements. At Seno, Colonel Thao Ly produced one of his three GM 21 battalions – the Black Tigers of 99 BP – which was flown to Luang Prabang, then helilifted to positions south of GM 15.

On 13 January, the 148th Regiment shifted its sights toward the FAR hilltop command post. Under fire, Bounchanh panicked, fearing that the Nambac valley was already under communist control. With haste, he found Colonel Khampai and together they started evading to the south.

With Bounchanh gone, the remaining FAR outposts suddenly could not communicate through the central command post. Within a day, GMs 11, 12, and 25 left their trenches and headed south.

As these regiments sprinted back toward Luang Prabang, GM 15 maintained a lonely vigil at Moung Ngoi. Except for a handful of guerrillas, the promised Hmong battalion had fallen hopelessly behind schedule and had yet to link up in the village. The 316th Division, meanwhile, had just taken delivery of a shipment of Soviet-made 122mm DKZ rockets – never before seen on the Laos battlefield – intended for use against the Nambac valley. With Nambac abandoned, GM 15 instead became ground zero for the rockets. As these missiles rained down on Moung Ngoi, one hit a cluster of Hmong guerrillas, killing seven. Their position quickly growing untenable, the paratroopers packed their gear and exfiltrated.

In its haste to leave, GM 15 forgot to inform 99 BP, which was still getting settled after just four days on the ground. Robbed of all other stationary targets, the North Vietnamese descended on this lone battalion. The Black Tigers, to their credit, fought back to the end. Except for 13 men, the GM 21 paratroopers were either killed or taken prisoner.

As FAR troops streamed south, the FAR General Staff hastily prepared plans to fly in two FAN battalions from Moung Soui in order to form a new defensive line 30 kilometres south of Nambac. In the end, the reinforcement plan was dropped. Dropped, too, was any hope that the 1967–68 dry season would allow the RLG to transcend the cyclical pattern of the war and permanently seize the strategic initiative in northern Laos.

In the after-battle tally at Nambac, Vientiane compiled a list of staggering material losses. Left behind were thirty-six 60mm mortars, sixteen 81mm mortars, forty-two 57mm recoilless rifles, seven 75mm recoilless rifles, one 75mm howitzer, six 105mm howitzers, and more than one million tons of ammunition—in total, a $2.25 million setback.

Human losses were even more devastating. Of the more than 4,000 FAR troops under Bounchanh's control, just 1,400 were found by the end of January. Bounchanh himself, along with Khampai, was picked up by chopper after walking for two days. Because of his poor field leadership, there was a chorus of calls for Bounchanh's ouster; because he was a favourite of FAR commander Ouane, however, the colonel's career suffered little.

Revamping an Army

That Nambac left the 51,000-man FAR in shambles was an understatement. Of its 11 pre-Nambac *groupements mobiles*, five – GM 11 in MR 1, GMs 12 and 15 in MR 3, GM 25 in MR 6, and GM 27 in MR 7 – were crippled. That left just GM 13 at Paksane, GM 16 at Pakse, GM 17 in MR 5, GM 18 at Savannakhet, GM 19 at Thakhek, and two battalions of GM 21 at Seno (the Black Tigers of 99 BP had ceased to exist).

Exceedingly weak, too, was the 9,600-man FAN. Back in March 1967, as the exiled Kong Le left Indonesia for Hong Kong, Colonel Somphet Sothsavan officially assumed duties as FAN commander in chief. Already FAN had been roughly divided among four powerful colonels: Somphet, Sing, Soulivanh, and Khamko. Each of these men was given control over a FAN *groupement mobile*, which ranged in size from one to three battalions.

Within a week after assuming the top slot, Somphet initiated steps to merge the Neutralists into the FAR mainstream. To begin this process, he had dispatched two of the FAN regiments – Sing's GM 802 and Khamko's GM 804 – to help General Phasouk in MR 4.

By the fall of 1967, however, Somphet was beset with problems. First, Kong Le, having left Hong Kong in June for France, was attempting to recontact loyalists and stir up dissent. Next, when Somphet forwarded a list of Neutralist officers for integration into FAR, the Royalists balked because the list reflected promotions given after 1962. Last, three key FAN officers in south Laos were exceedingly weak, but resisted attempts by Somphet to have them replaced.

Given such an obvious need for reform in both FAR and FAN, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma focused on the former and on 9 March 1968 asked the FAR General Staff to consider a reorganisation. The generals met over the following month to discuss the request and by 4 May delivered an initial plan for the Prime Minister's signature. Central to their proposal was the dissolution of all *groupement mobile* headquarters, leaving subordinate battalions as independent formations.

The stated reason for this was because the logistical challenges of supporting regiment-sized units had been proven beyond the capability of FAR. More likely, the General Staff had disbanded its regiments because they saw GM commanders as potential competitors for power. This, after all, had been the case in 1965 at Paksane and Thakhek, as well as during the Thao Ma uprisings in 1966. The Nambac fiasco, which effectively wiped out nearly half the GMs, plus the fact that the CIA's guerrillas had proven themselves capable of picking up the slack, merely gave Vientiane a ready-made excuse to divide tactical forces into nothing larger than battalions.

Along with splitting the GMs, Vientiane further dictated that battalions be standardised at 666 men. To do this, the personnel previously with GM 25, GM 27, GM 12, and all but one battalion from GM 13 were used as fillers for other units. In addition, the former GM 18 battalions – BIs 28, 29, and 30 – were redesignated, respectively, as three *bataillons commandos*: BCs 201 and 202 at Seno, and BC 203 at Kengkok. Similarly, the three mauled GM 15 parachute battalions were used as the nucleus for three more commando battalions: BC 204, formerly 55 BP, at Luang Prabang; BC 205, previously 11 BP, at Vientiane; and BC 206, the old 1 BP, at Paksane. Despite these embellished titles, the six commando battalions would become, in reality, no different from infantry battalions in training, equipment, and mission.

At the same time, the paratroopers from the two remaining GM 21 airborne battalions, 33 and 66 BPs, were expanded into three new parachute battalions at Seno: 101, 102, and 103 BP.

On top of these changes, Vientiane ordered that MRs 6 and 7 – vestiges of the Phoumi era – be reabsorbed into MR 1 and 4, respectively. Last, the posts of GT Nord and Sud – which had theoretically divided control of the country between Generals Ouane and Bounpone – were abolished. The post of FAR deputy commander – jointly held by both Bounpone and Kouprasith – was also discontinued.

As these directives took effect in July 1968, dozens of high-ranking FAR officers suddenly found themselves without jobs and clamouring for a shrinking number of choice posts. At the top of the heap, Major General Ouane lost his GT Nord hat but remained FAR commander in chief. Major General Bounpone, who had lost his jobs as FAR deputy commander and head of GT Sud, was forced to settle for the lesser jobs of MR 3 commander and FAR deputy chief of staff. (In the FAR pecking order, FAR deputy commander was more prestigious than deputy chief of staff). The previous head of MR 3, the lacklustre Brigadier General Kot Venevongsos, was demoted one level to MR 3 deputy commander.

In MR 5, Major General Kouprasith remained an iron grip over this key region. However, he did lose his second job as FAR deputy commander.

In MR 1, command remained in the hands of Brigadier General Tiao Sayavong, the King's brother. Selected as Sayavong's new deputy at Luang Prabang was Colonel Bounchanh, his career on solid ground (due to support from General Ouane) despite being totally discredited at Nambac. Unchanged were Generals Phasouk and Vang Pao, who retained hold over their respective regions.

For the unemployed GM commanders, a mixed bag of alternative postings was concocted by Vientiane as consolation. GM 11's Khampai Sayasith, on good terms with General Ouane, got the twin jobs of commanding the Ban Houei Sai subdivision and its local volunteer battalion, BV 18 – both extremely sensitive slots since Ban Houei Sai was the locus of Ouane's profitable opium dealings. Tiao Monivong Kindavong, the GM 15 chief who boasted royal blood, shifted to Sam Thong as MR 2 chief of operations. GM 19's Amkha Khamthamixay was named chief of staff of MR 5. GM 16's Soutchay, who already had a second hat as Phasouk's paramilitary liaison officer, got the more attractive title of chief of staff for MR 4 irregular forces. GM 21's Thao Ly became chief of staff for irregular forces in MR 3.

Three other powerful regimental commanders – GM 12's Ratanabanlang, GM 17's Atsaphanthong, and GM 18's Nouphet – were left in need of fancy titles commensurate with their considerable influence. Accordingly, the General Staff invented streamlined *groupements tactiques*, each theoretically responsible for tactical deployment of infantry and volunteer battalions within a specific province. Ratanabanlang, then, became commander of GT 312 in Khammouane Province. Nouphet, named GT 318 commander, was in charge of unit deployment in Savannakhet Province. Similarly, GM 17's Atsaphanthong retained a firm grip over battalions in Vientiane Province.

Simultaneous with these FAR reforms, the Neutralists embarked on changes of their own. On 29 July 1968, Colonel Somphet issued a reorganisation order, signed by Souvanna Phouma in November. First, all four FAN *groupements mobiles* were disbanded. Second, many Neutralist battalions received redesignations better

MR 3 training staff is briefed on the M16 rifle prior to its general distribution to FAR units, August 1969. (Photo courtesy Joe Bossi)

conforming to Royalist nomenclature. Of the FAN's two volunteer battalions, for example, the Moung Soui-based BV 2 became BV 25 and BV 1 at Vang Vieng became BV 58, both fitting perfectly into the FAR's numbering sequence for volunteer battalions in MRs 2 and 5. Two parachute battalions, 2 BP in the south and 4 BP at Moung Soui, were redubbed BC 207 and BC 208, respectively, adding two more to the FAR string of six commando battalions. One other battalion in the south, 5 BP, became 104 BP, again in keeping with the numbering sequence set by FAR.

The FAN reorganisation, largely smooth, was soured by two incidents. In the first case, Colonel

Khamko, infuriated that he would lose his title as GM 804 commander (which in reality consisted of just one battalion), refused to cooperate. The colonel later repented and was allowed to remain in MR 4 as commander of BI 18. In the second case, Lieutenant Colonel Bounyavong Sabob's BI 5 – reformed after the original battalion was crushed at Moung Hiem in 1966 – received orders to change its name to BC 209. Before this was done, new orders were issued calling for BI 5 to integrate its men into BIs 14 and 15. Realising he would lose his battalion command, Sabob balked, deserting Moung Soui in September with two companies and walking south. Somphet, fearing they would defect to the communists, had aircraft ferry the two FAN companies and their families to Vientiane; Sabob was ultimately jailed for the revolt and BI 5 was dropped from the FAN order of battle.

6

GLOVES OFF

After Nambac, the RLG suffered a string of battlefield reverses over the rest of 1968. Virtually all of these engagements were headlined by the CIA's fast-expanding guerrilla forces. Especially hard hit had been MR 2, which was left on extremely bad footing as it approached the dry season at year's end.

Not looking to disappoint, the North Vietnamese came out swinging in the first quarter of 1969. Some of the most devastating communist attacks were reserved for Moung Soui. Ever since 1966, this site – which hosted a FAN garrison, Thai artillery, and a forward staging base for T-28s – had loomed high on the North Vietnamese hitlist. Twice before – in February 1967 and again in April 1968 – their sappers had tried to penetrate the FAN garrison; both times they came up short.

Communist displeasure with Moung Soui had deepened further on the last night of 1968 when the Thai SR battalion (stationed at Ban Khay, three kilometres to the northeast) towed a pair of its 155mm howitzers 10 kilometres east and rained shells down on a wealth of PDJ targets. Over by morning, this was set to be followed on New Year's Day by a major T-28 bombing campaign across the northern plain.

Before the Moung Soui air operation could begin in earnest, it was put on a month's hold to allow for a coordinated FAN foray onto the western PDJ. By the close of January, the Neutralists attached four 105mm howitzers – half their total – to trucks and dragged them six kilometres east of Ban Khay. At that point another delay ensued as the artillery crews awaited a linkup with FAN infantrymen and paratroopers.

With the RLAF-FAN operation at long last set to begin on 11 February, the evening prior to that a team of US military advisors gathered at Moung Soui for last-minute preparations. As they retired to their billets for sleep, North Vietnamese commandos staged a perfectly timed spoiling attack on the FAN compound. One US Army captain and 11 FAN soldiers were killed in the raid, bringing an end to the PDJ operation before it even started.

Equally grim news came from Nakhang the following month. During the opening phase of an early March attack, the North Vietnamese shot dead Lieutenant Colonel Phan and nearly all of his fellow FAR officers. Of the 218-man BV 26, only half remained. Realising further resistance was futile, the garrison attempted a breakout to the west. Normally, the North Vietnamese refrained

Project 404 advisor Joe Bossi (right) and a paratrooper from the French training mission (second from right) confer with the GM 21 commander, Colonel Thao Ly (centre), and Lieutenant Bounsom (second from left) at Seno, 1968. It was common FAR practice to place branch, regimental or divisional insignia on the left shoulder; insignia for military regions or the General Staff went on the right. Battalion insignia, on the rare occasions worn, usually went on a chest pocket. (Photo courtesy Joe Bossi)

Paratroopers from the 101 BP move onto the PDJ during Operation Kou Kiet, August 1969. They have used 75mm recoilless rifle shells to spell out their unit designation to avoid accidental bombings from friendly aircraft. (Photo courtesy William Keeler)

from harassing withdrawal columns, abiding by an unspoken agreement whereby Lao troops were allowed to melt away without having to resort to stiff, protracted defensive actions. This time – perhaps recalling the beatings they had taken at Nakhang in previous years – the Vietnamese offered no respite, mauling the RLG troops as they abandoned the site.

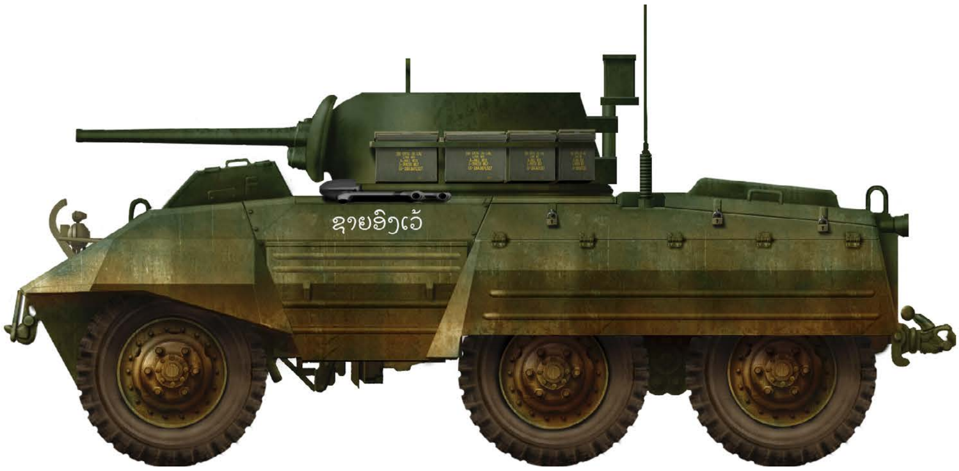
The loss of Nakhang had been extremely costly. Gone was Lieutenant Colonel Phan and the RLG's symbolic civilian administration for Sam Neua Province. Gone, too, was the bulk of Phan's troops: of the four FAR volunteer battalions posted in the sector, only 140 survivors from BV 27, 73 from BV 26, 43 from BV 29, and 30 from BV 28 managed to regroup in the hills north and west of Nakhang.

As bad as that was, Major General Vang Pao had little time for mourning. Rains were on the horizon, and with the heightened precipitation came the expectation that he would start retaking real estate. The FAR General Staff was somewhat sympathetic, agreeing to loan him 103 BP from Seno. Once the paratroopers arrived in April, they linked up with Hmong guerrillas and walked into the deserted Xieng Khouangville valley. This lasted a month before the North Vietnamese mobilised enough troops to take back the vicinity. The paratroopers sustained 200 casualties in the process, earning them a return trip to MR 3.

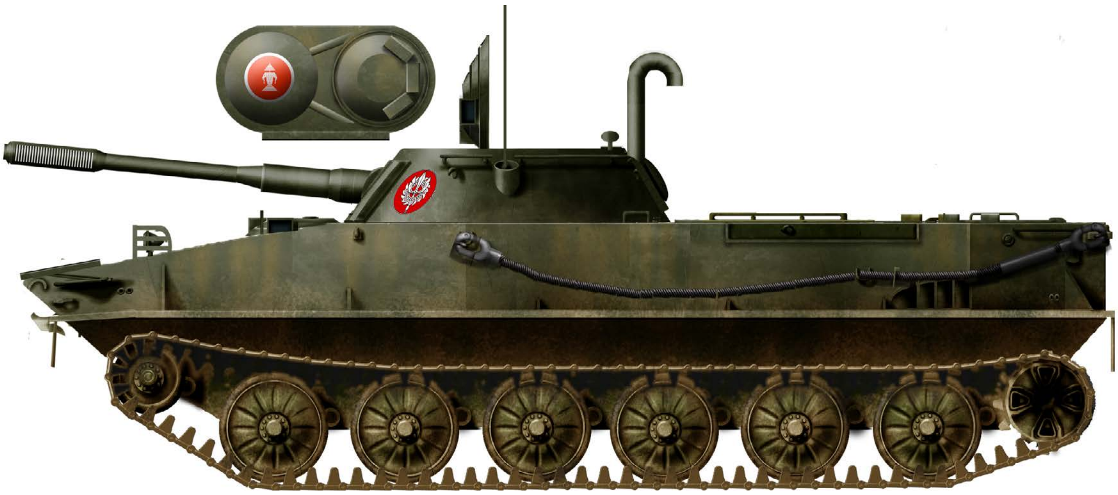
During the second half of June, Vang Pao launched his annual rainy season offensive in earnest. Because the RLG hold over Sam Neua Province was in tatters, his focus was to be exclusively within Xieng Khouang. He envisioned an operation with three prongs: his Hmong guerrillas would hit the southern PDJ, the Thai and FAN would surge forth from Moung Soui, and MR 5 would get a bit of the action with a column moving toward Tha Thom.

Before making any headway, the North Vietnamese staged yet another well-timed spoiling attack on Moung Soui – this time using PT-76 tanks. By 26 June, the entire FAN garrison had abandoned their posts and headed south toward Xieng Dat. Alone and vulnerable, the Thai artillerymen the next day reluctantly departed in an airlift.

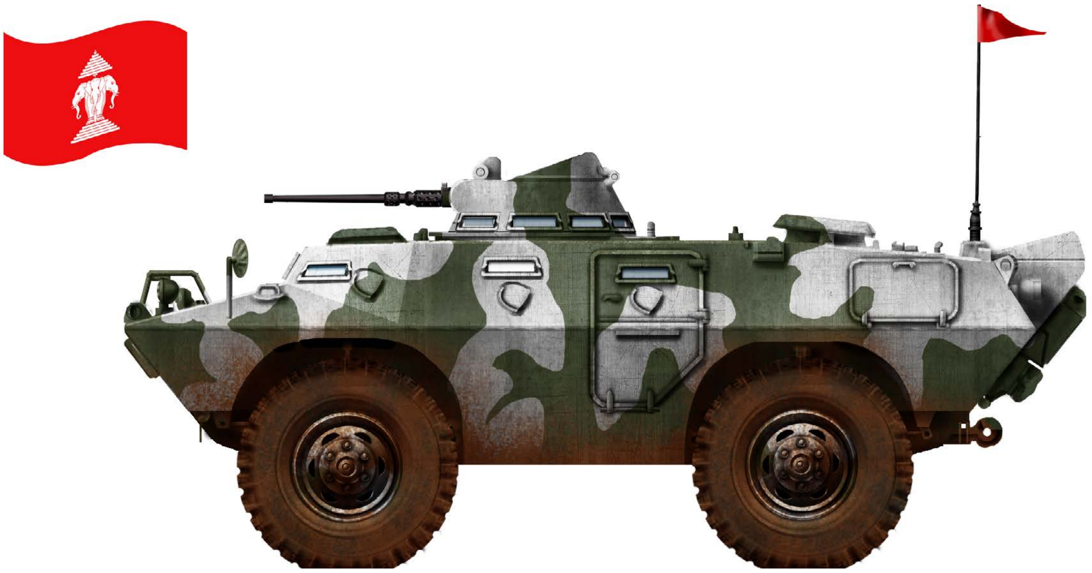
Though off to a disappointing start, Vang Pao refused to concede the monsoon initiative to the North Vietnamese. On 28 June—the day after Moung Soui's evacuation – he concocted an updated proposal for a limited rainy season drive codenamed Operation Off Balance. This focused on getting the FAN to move from Xieng Dat back into Moung Soui. To accomplish this, they would be helped by Hmong irregulars as well as a new airborne contribution, 101 BP, from Seno.



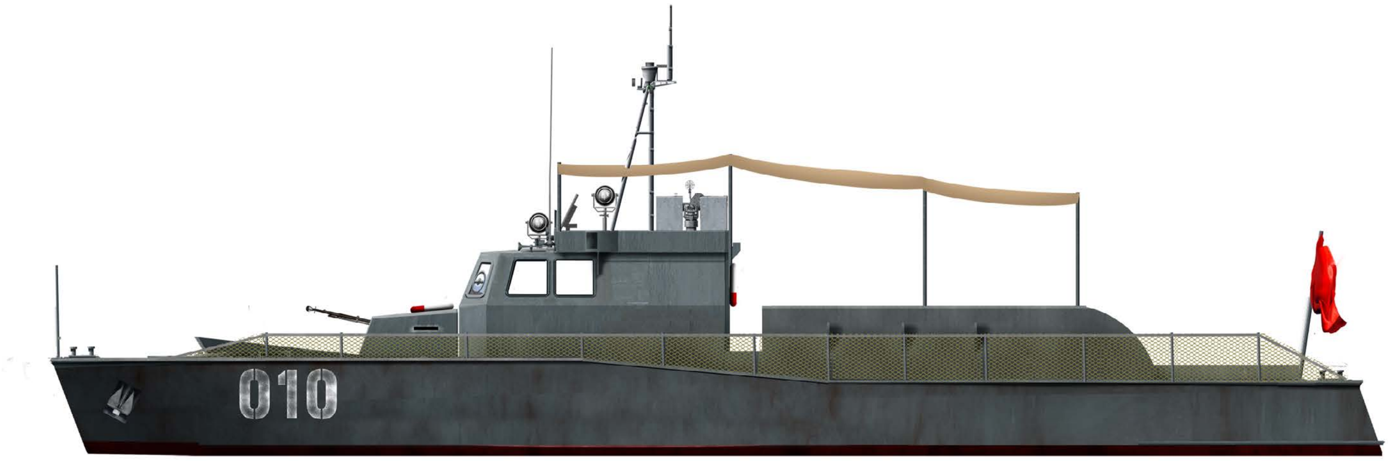
In 1953, the French established an initial armoured recce squadron in the ANL equipped with jeeps, 19 M3A1 scout cars, and 13 M8 Greyhound armoured cars. The M8s would serve as the backbone of the FAR's Armoured Command through the 1960s, often being used within Vientiane during periods of political turmoil such as the 1960 counter-coup against Kong Le. It was common practice for the FAR to name individual armoured vehicles after prominent persona from yesteryear; the Lao inscription on the side of this M8 reads "Victorious Ong Ve," referring to a short-lived ruler in the nineteenth century who (ironically) had been installed by the Vietnamese. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



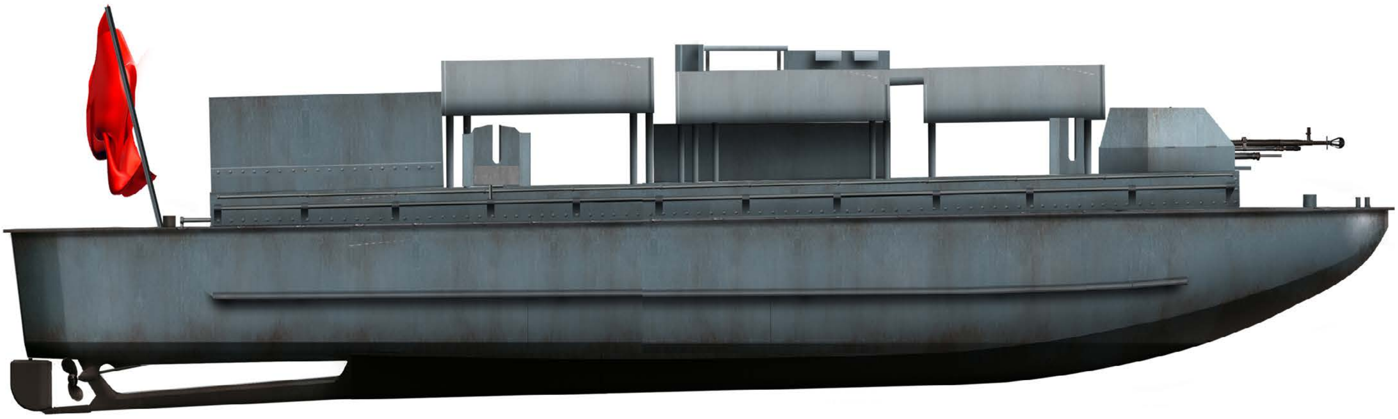
In December 1961, the North Vietnamese provided 45 Soviet-made PT-76 amphibious tanks and BTR-40 armoured cars to the FAN on the PDJ. One year later in September 1962, US Ambassador Leonard Unger visited FAN forces on the plain and found its armour had been painted with FAR-style trident/discus emblems – part of a conscious effort by Kong Le to shift away from his erstwhile leftist allies. All of FAN's armour was lost on the PDJ in June 1964 in the face of strong communist pressure. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



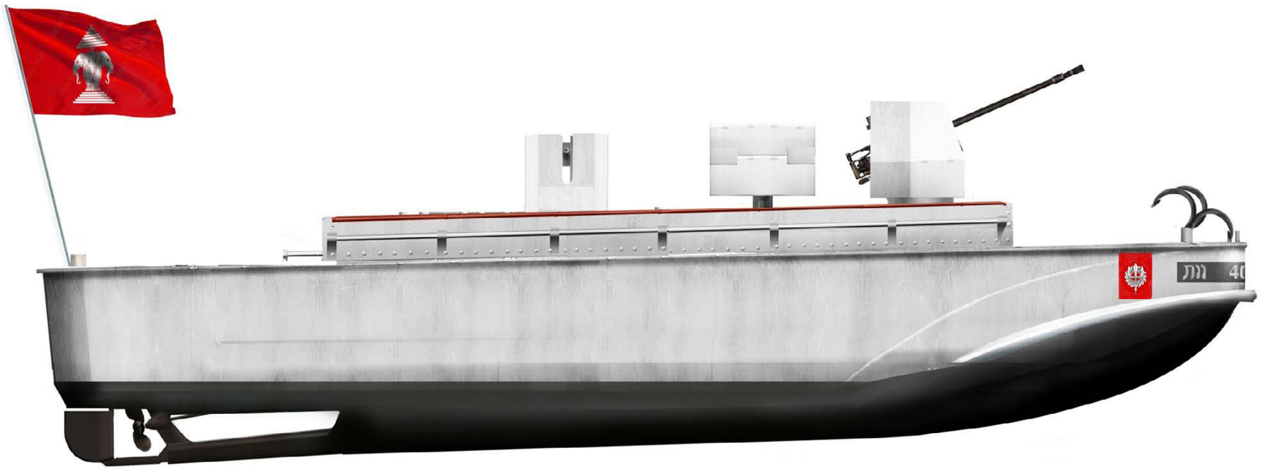
Among the 15 Cadillac Gage M706 armoured cars turned over to FAR in 1970 were several open-topped XM706E2 versions. Some were equipped with four .30-calibre M1919 Brownings on the top, or in this case one .50-calibre M2 Browning facing front and two .30-calibre M1919 Brownings on the side pintle mounts. Only the Cadillac Gage M706 armoured cars assigned to the 2nd Recce Squadron in Vientiane were painted in this two-tone camouflage. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



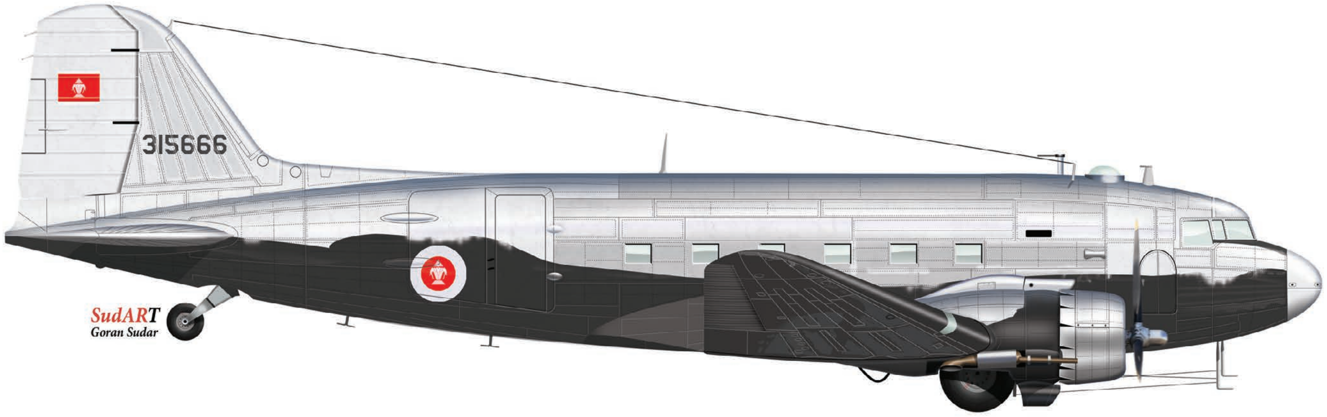
Laos was the only nation to which France supplied the Wizard-class gunboats, nine of which arrived starting in August 1954. Their 17-metre-long hull provided enough space for a pair of .30-calibre machine guns, a 60mm mortar, and a .50-calibre machine gun on the front deck. Notably, in service in Laos, the mesh was usually removed from the side rail. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



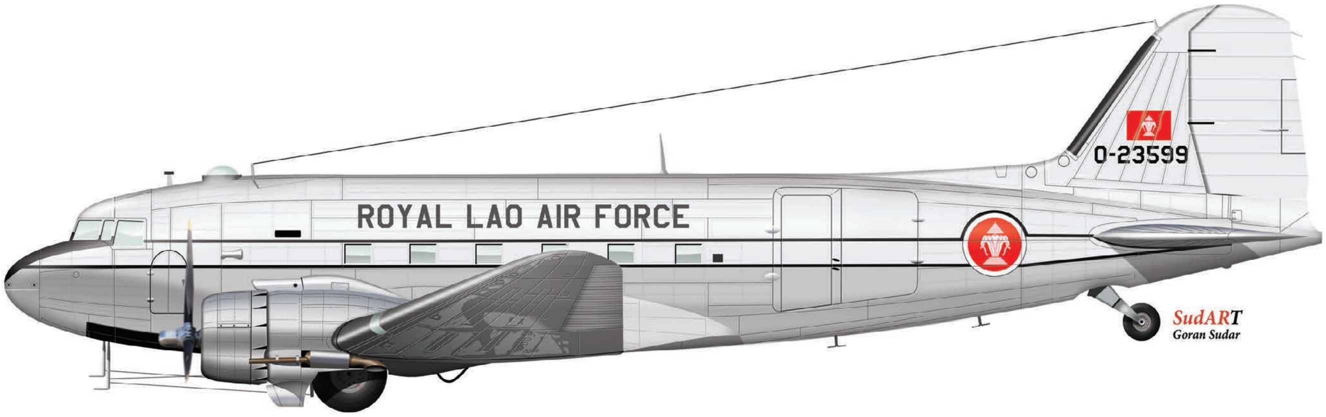
The FOM 11 was French-designed and manufactured class of 11-metre-long patrol boats armed with 12.7mm machine guns at the front and rear, and two side-firing .30-calibre machine guns. A total of eight was supplied to Laos. In many cases, the rear machine gun was replaced by a 75mm recoilless rifle, installed on an elevated mount. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



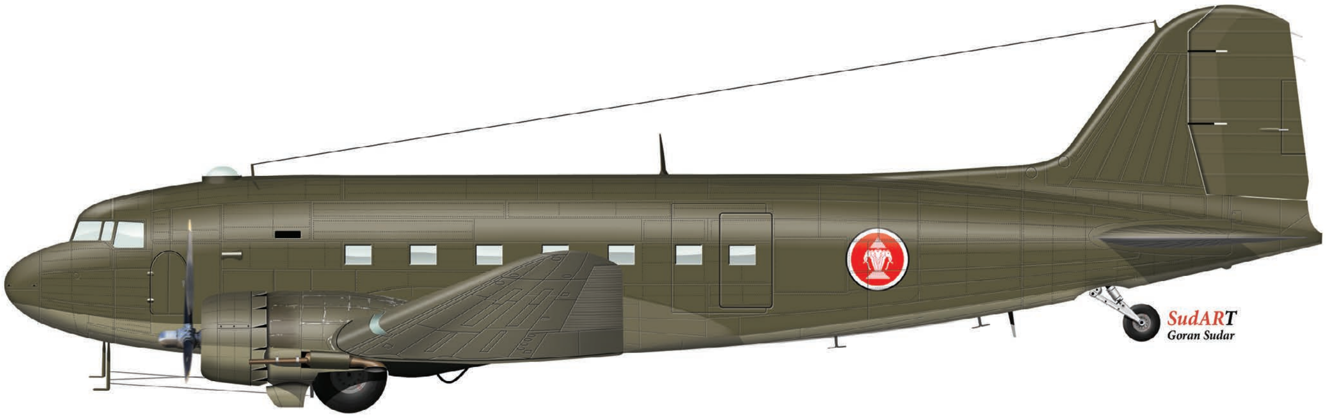
The FOM 8 was a scaled-down, 8-metre-long version of the FOM 11, armed with a single 12.7mm machine gun on the front, and two smaller machine guns on side swivels. Only three were supplied to Laos. For a ceremony held in 1969, one of these was painted in white, and received a white and red trident, a title in Lao language, and numbers in white on the bow. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



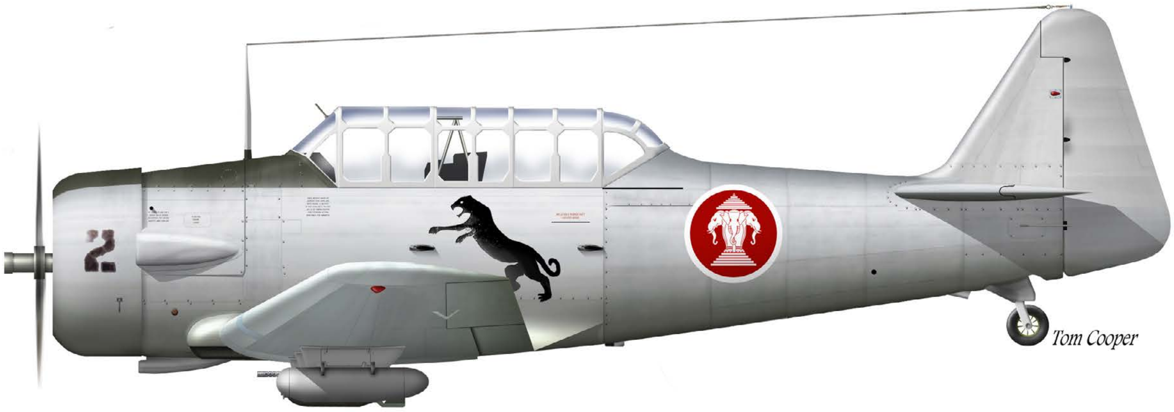
Five C-47s were turned over from the French to *Aviation Laotienne* in 1955, despite the fact that no Lao were yet qualified in twin-engine aircraft. Three of these, including that with serial number 315666, were given Lao roundels and flown by French crews dropping paratroopers into the beleaguered base of Moung Peun in mid-1955. The black underbelly, a colour scheme unique to this aircraft, was added in the early 1960s. Notably, the Lao flag on the tail has a white stripe added to the top and bottom. (Artwork by Goran Sudar)



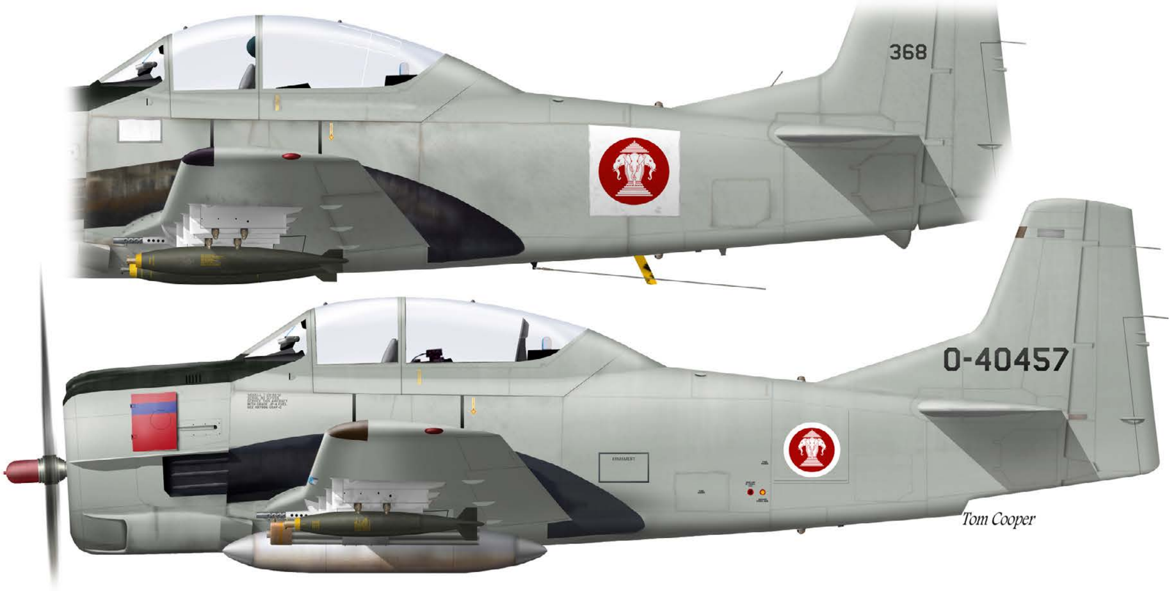
The C-47 was a mainstay of the RLAF for two decades beginning in 1955. This airframe (0-23599), used for parachute training at the opening of 1964, was damaged beyond repair that February. Through the 1960s, RLAF C-47s were painted white on the upper half, and silver grey on the lower half. All wore the title ROYAL LAO AIR FORCE in black along the upper sides of the fuselage. Two thin black cheat lines were applied down the centre fuselage. The serial number in black was applied on the fin. (Artwork by Goran Sudar)



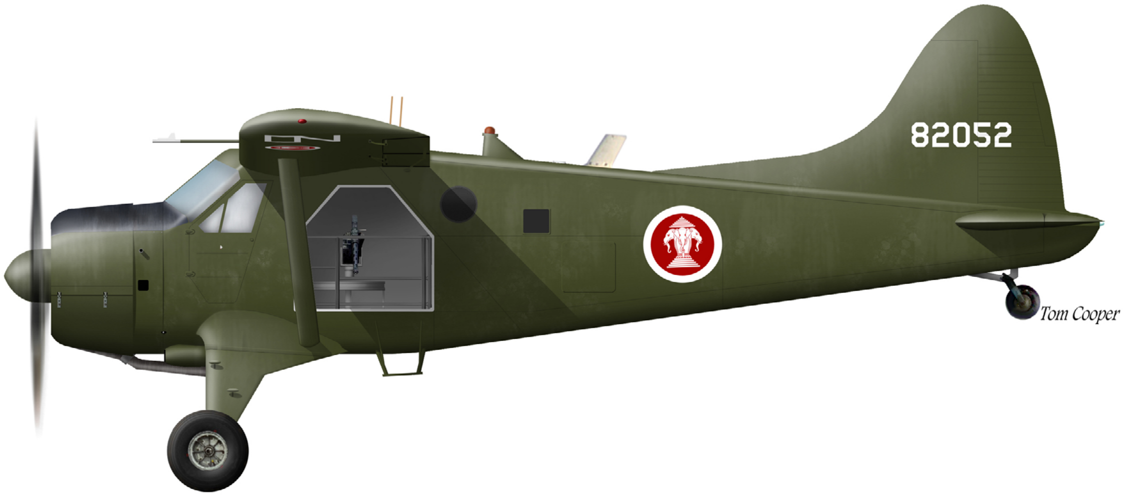
In late 1962, the Soviet Union turned over nine Lisunov Li-2 (license-built DC-3) transports. Three went to the RLAF, three to the Pathet Lao, and three to Kong Le's Royal Laotian Government Air Force. This model, for the RLAF, was painted in dark green and sported the normal RLAF roundel. Lao Li-2s were painted in dark green overall, though photos of two different examples indicate the use of a light green along the underbelly of at least one. The RLAF roundel was applied on the fuselage, but usually red and white, while the version applied on Li-2s might have been in black. (Artwork by Goran Sudar)



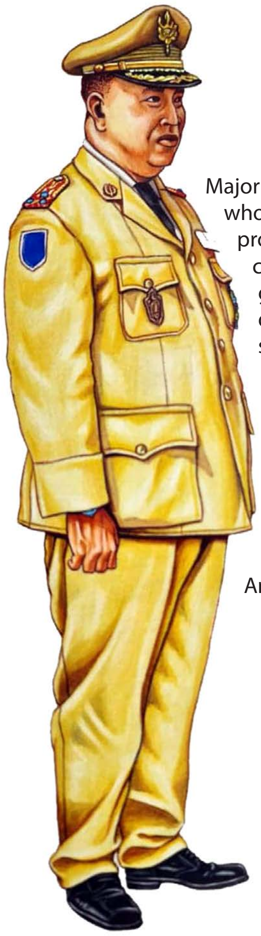
The North American T-6 was the first fighter aircraft of the RLAF. Four were transferred from the Royal Thai Air Force to Wattay in January 1961. All were painted in high-speed aluminium finish overall and had a dark green anti-glare panel applied along the upper side of the front fuselage. The example illustrated here – serial number '2' – sported a black panther painted underneath the cockpit. They could be armed with 50kg bombs and pods for 7.62mm machine guns. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



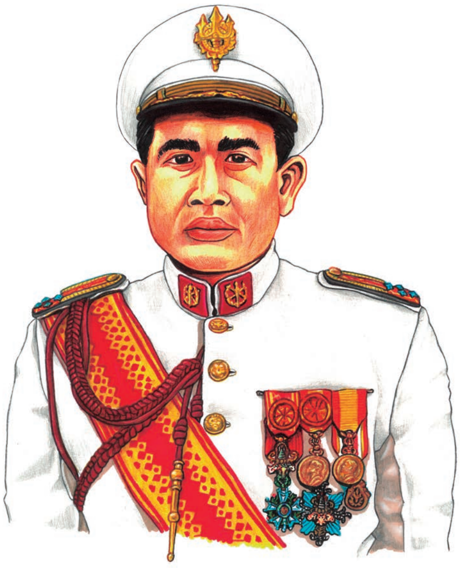
More than any other aircraft, the North American T-28 Trojan and their roster of brave pilots came to symbolise the RLAF. Virtually none of the dozens of airframes that passed through the RLAF strayed from this light gull grey overall colour scheme. One slight difference was the size and location of the erawan roundel on the fuselage. The T-28B 0-40457 (BuAerNo 140457), which saw RLAF for a decade before being transferred to the Philippines in 1974, had slightly smaller roundels, while aircraft 368 (inset), which crash-landed at Nakhang in 1966, had larger roundels positioned somewhat forward. The T-28D serial 368 had its roundel applied much larger and applied on what appears to have been a white square – painted either around the roundel, or prior to its application. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



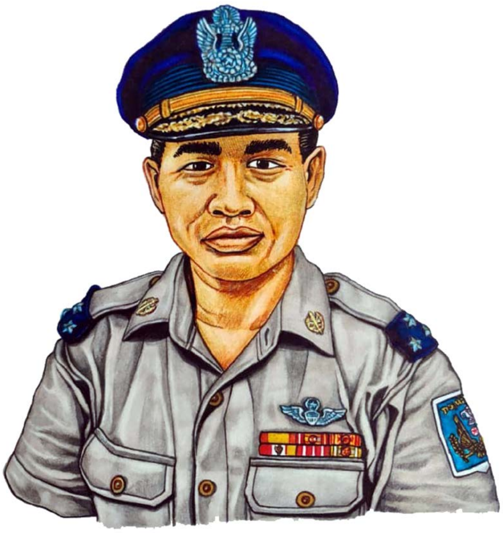
Four L-20 (DHC-2 Beaver) light transports were delivered by the US to *Aviation Laotienne* in the late 1950s. In February 1965, one of the Beavers was outfitted with a .50-calibre machine gun out the side door and used as a makeshift gunship during a coup d'état in Vientiane. The aircraft was painted in dark green overall, with a black anti-glare panel atop the engine. It wore a white tail number and the erawan on the fuselage, and as a sort of a serial, a white '2' and the erawan under the left wing. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



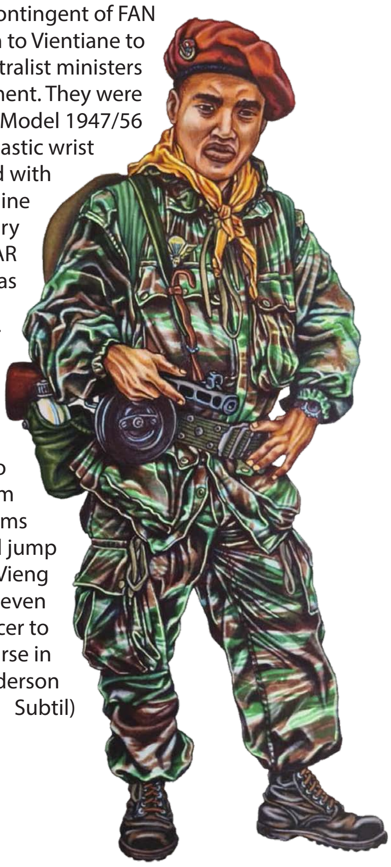
Major General Ouane Rathikoun, 1967. Ouane, who was tainted by involvement with narcotics production and gold smuggling, was the FAR commander beginning in 1964. He would get his promotion to lieutenant general two days before his retirement in July 1971. His shoulder insignia is for the FAR General Staff. By the mid-1960s, FAR service uniforms combining a jacket and tie came in a variety of colours for various occasions: a "summer" light khaki version (seen here) was most common; a dark brown "winter" version was sometimes used during the rainy season, and a dark blue version was worn during overseas trips. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



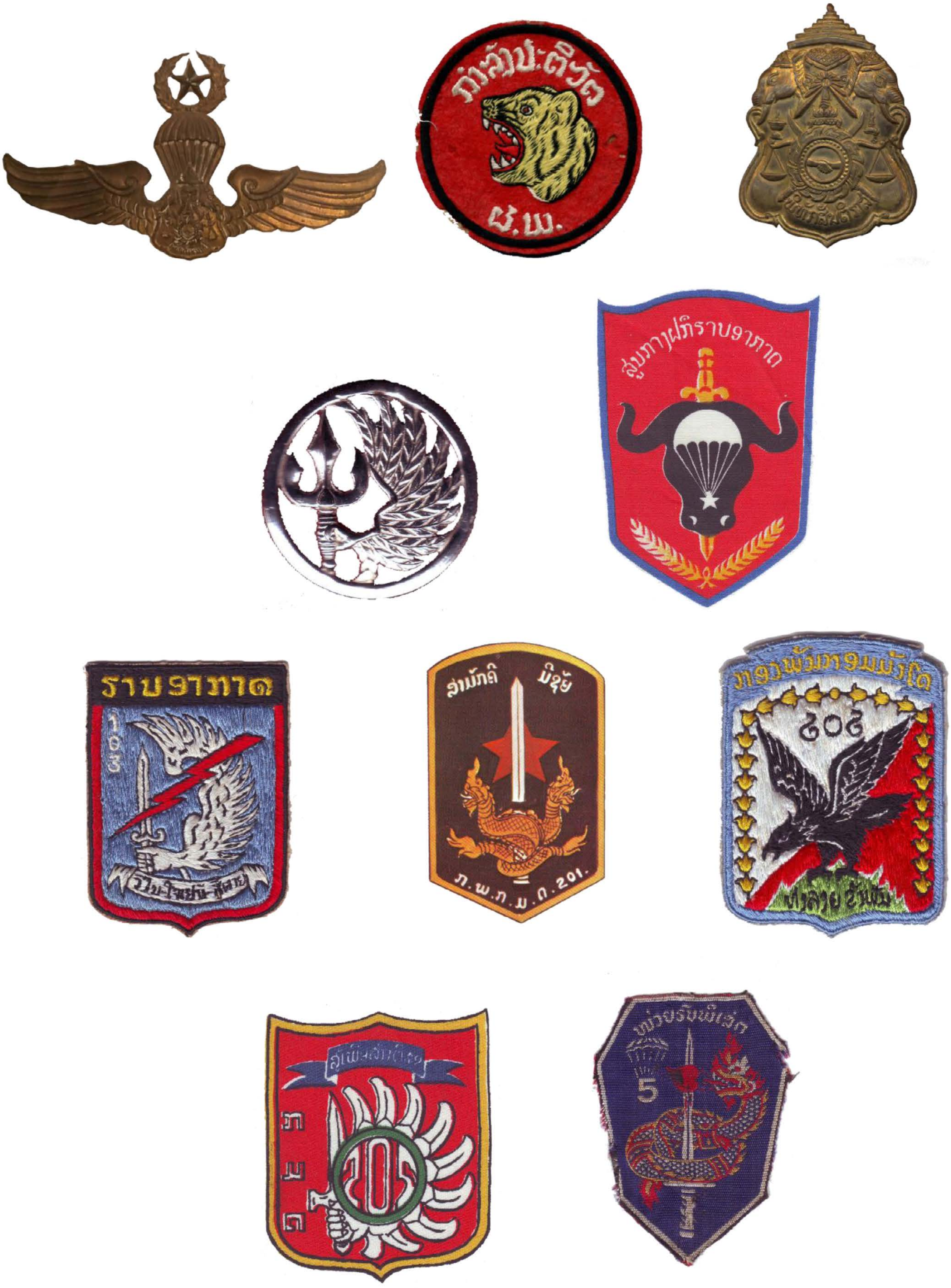
Lieutenant General Bounleut Sanichanh, March 1972. A staunch Phoumi Nosavan loyalist, Bounleut was rewarded in January 1961 with a promotion to FAL commander in chief; he concurrently became Secretary of State for National Security. He held these top slots until April 1964, after which time he was shunted aside to the hollow role of FAR Inspector General. In March 1972, Bounleut and FAR commander Bounpone both received their fourth stars of lieutenant general. Bounleut's dress uniform seen here, combining a white jacket with standing collar and black pants, was only used during the most formal ceremonies with the King in attendance. Other variants of FAR dress white uniforms included a white jacket with standing collar and white pants, or a white jacket and white pants with white shirt and black tie. A dark blue version with standing collar was sometimes used during overseas trips. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



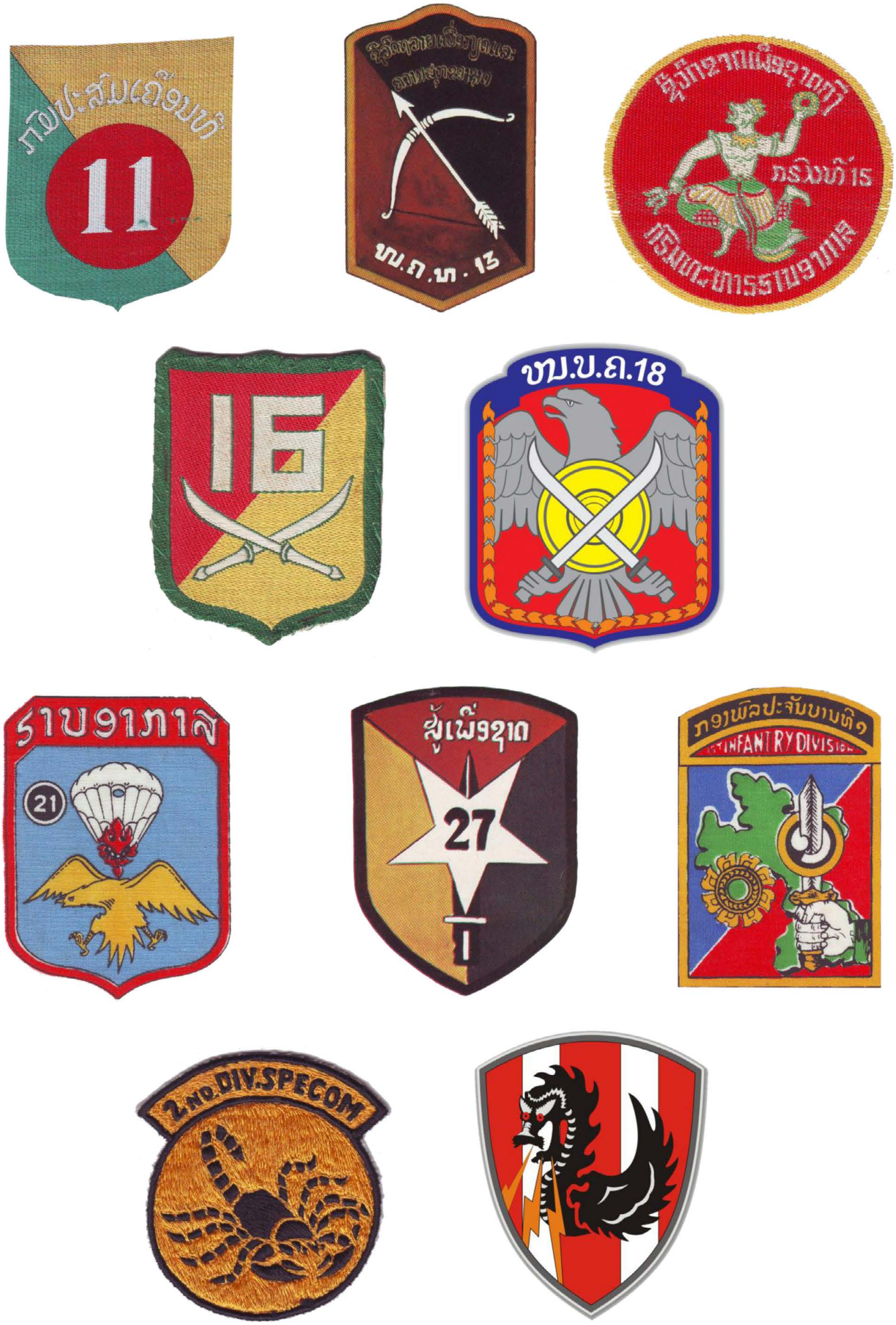
Major General Sourith Don Sasorith, 1972. Commander of aviation assets in Laos for a total of 13 years, General Sasorith was not himself a pilot. He was sometimes photographed wearing US Army master aviator wings on his service uniforms, probably from the US Army mobile training team giving H-34 instruction to RLAF students at Udorn RTAFB. Sourith initiated use of the unique RLAF cap badge (seen here) in 1967; prior to that the RLAF used the standard FAR badge on peaked caps. Sourith's successor, Brigadier General Bouathong Phothivongsa, in 1974 reverted back to using the FAR badge. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



In June 1962, a contingent of FAN paratroopers was flown to Vientiane to serve as bodyguards for Neutralist ministers in the coalition government. They were all dressed in French TAP Model 1947/56 camouflage (with elastic wrist closures) and equipped with Soviet PPSh-41 sub-machine guns. Although FAN heraldry rarely strayed from FAR designs, this contingent was given unique beret badges that commemorated their 1 January 1961 seizure of the PDJ. The French military mission in Laos had a soft spot for FAN paratroopers: in addition to intermittently supplying them with camouflage uniforms like these, they conducted jump training for FAN at Vang Vieng through the early 1970s and even sent one FAN warrant officer to France for a jumpmaster course in July 1971. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



Insignia for elite forces:
Top row (left to right): DNC airborne wing, master class, awarded after 60 jumps; DNC's GMS shoulder insignia; DNC beret badge
Second row: airborne beret badge, introduced in 1959; Airborne Training Centre at Seno.
Third row: BP 103; BC 201; BC 202
Fourth row: BC 205; Military Region 5 Commandos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16
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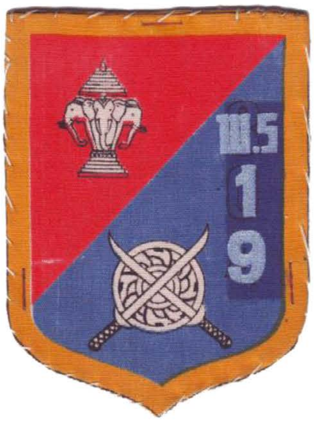
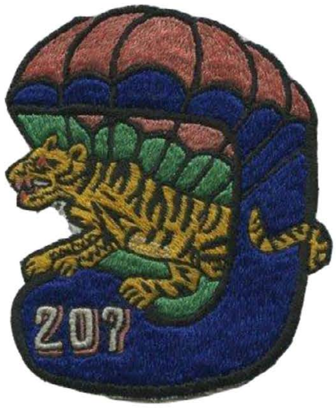
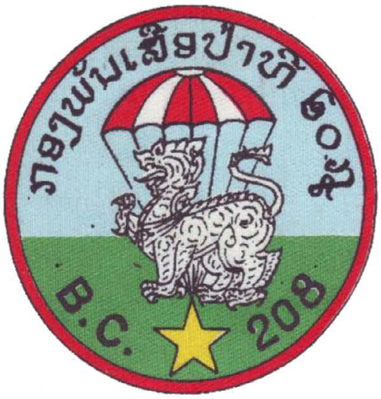
21
ສູ້ເພື່ອຊາດ
27
1ST INFANTRY DIVISION
2ND DIV.SPECOM

FAR Regimental and Divisional Insignia:
Top row (left to right): GM 11; GM 13; GM 15 (Airborne)
Second row: GM 16; GM 18
Third row: GM 21 (Airborne); GM 27; 1st Strike Division
Fourth row: SPECOM (under 2nd Strike Division); 7th Airborne Brigade



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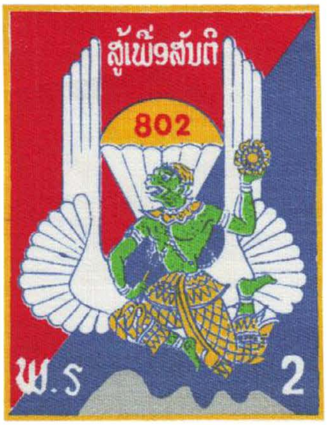
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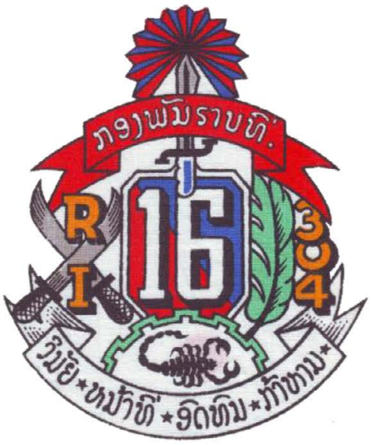
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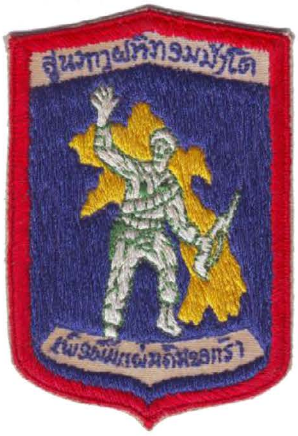

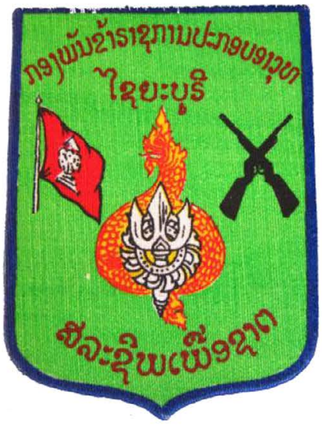
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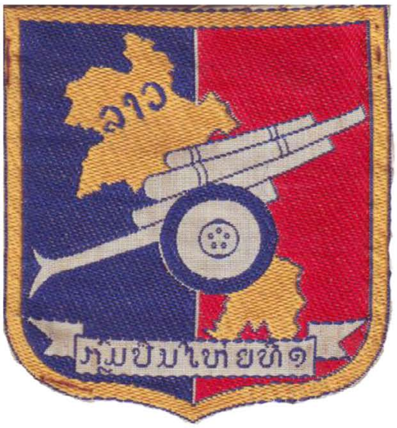
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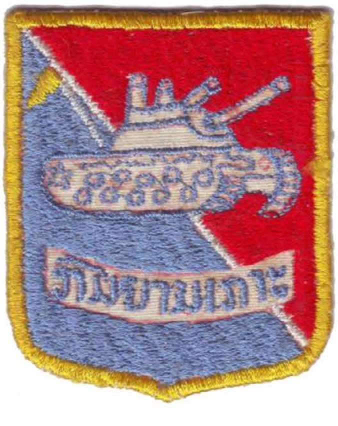
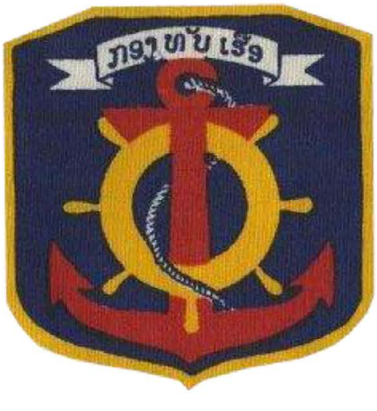




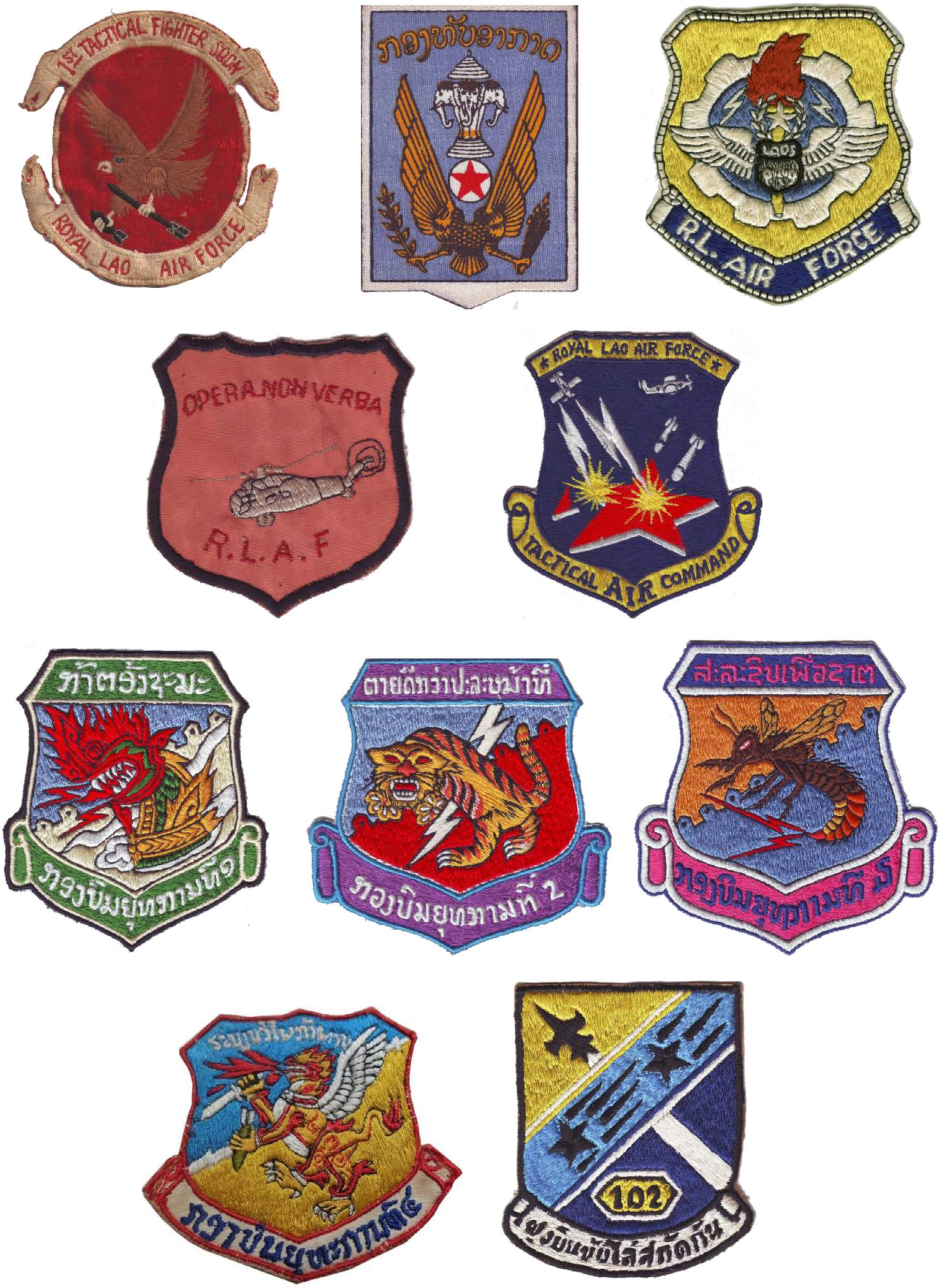
FAN, Training, and Branch Insignia:

Top row (left to right): FAN BI 19 (this numeral has been overprinted atop the numerals '304', which may indicate this was intended as a design for RI 304); FAN BC 207; FAN BC 208

Second row: FAN 2 BP under GM 802; FAN BI 16 under RI 304

Third row: Combat Arms Training Centre, Phou Khao Khouai; Reserve Officer Training Centre, Sayaboury, MR 6; 1st Field Artillery Group

Fourth row: 1st Armoured Brigade; MRL


1ST TACTICAL FIGHTER SQDN
ROYAL LAO AIR FORCE
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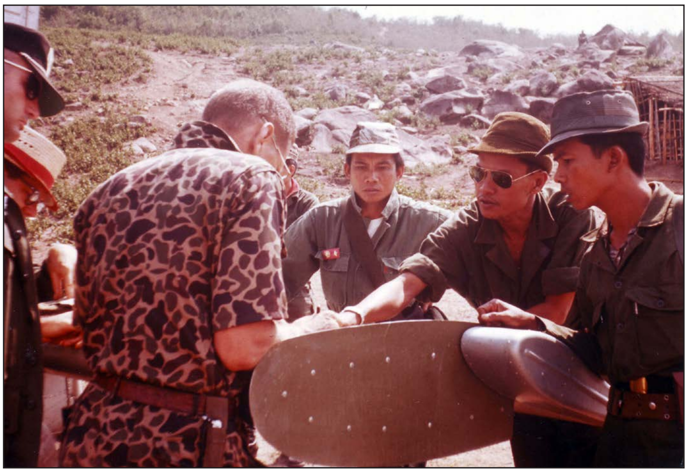
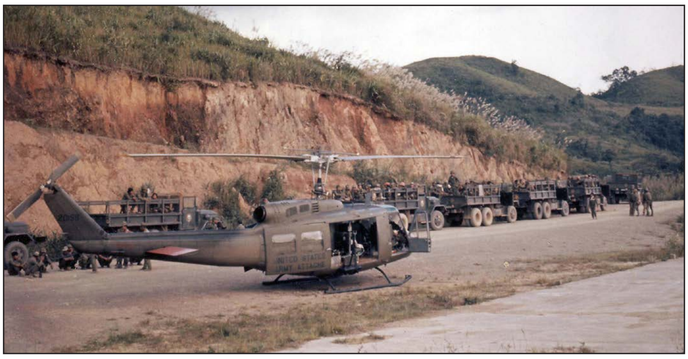
LAOS
R.L. AIR FORCE
OPERA NON VERBA
R.L.A.F
ROYAL LAO AIR FORCE
TACTICAL AIR COMMAND
102

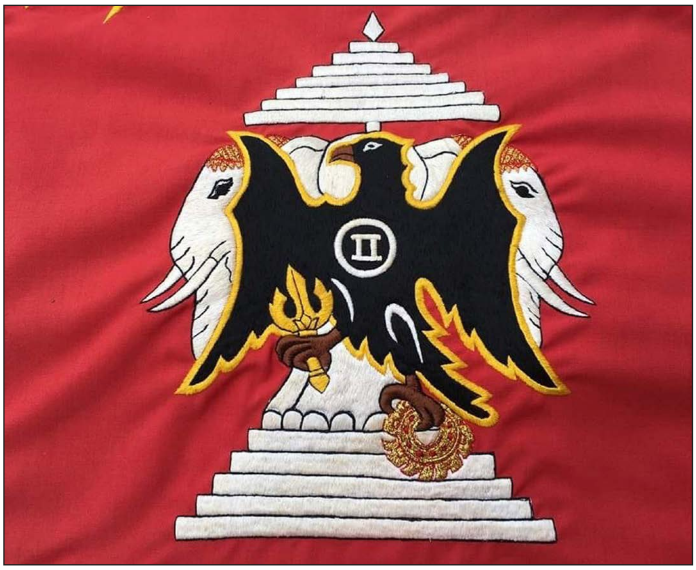
RLAF Insignia:
Top row (left to right): 1st Tactical Fighter Squadron, 1962; generic RLAF shoulder insignia, 1967–1975; RLAF flight suit insignia, 1971
Second row: RLAF H-34 insignia, made at Udorn RTAFB, 1967; RLAF Tactical Air Command, made at Ace Novelty Company in Tokyo in May 1969 (only 35 samples were delivered to Waterpump for resale to RLAF students, three years after the Tactical Air Command had already been abolished in the RLAF)
Third row: 1st Tactical Fighter Wing in Luang Prabang; 2nd Tactical Fighter Wing at Wattay Airbase; 3rd Tactical Fighter Wing in Savannakhet
Fourth row: 4th Tactical Fighter Wing in Pakse; 102nd Squadron at Wattay Airbase, 1969



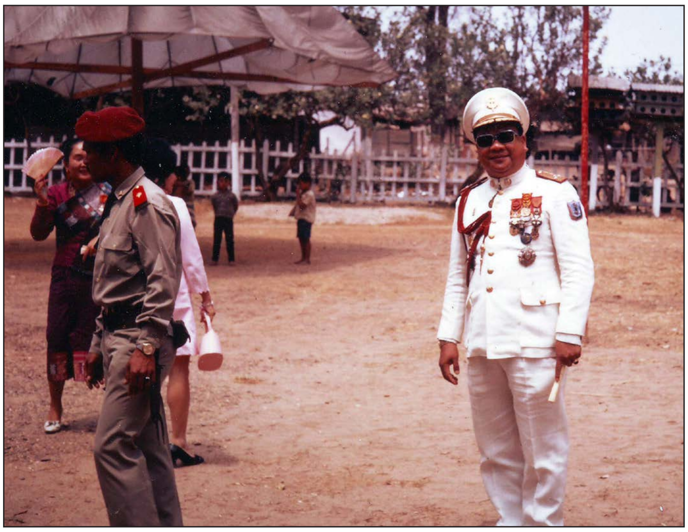
USAF Major William Keeler (wearing *beo gam* 'leopard' camouflage), the Wattay AOC commander from March-September 1966, confers with FAR officers after the retake of Moung Hiem in mid-1966. In the centre is Lieutenant Colonel Phan Siharat, the BV 26 commander and head of the Sam Neua military subdivision; he was later killed at Nakhang in March 1969. (Photo courtesy William Keeler)



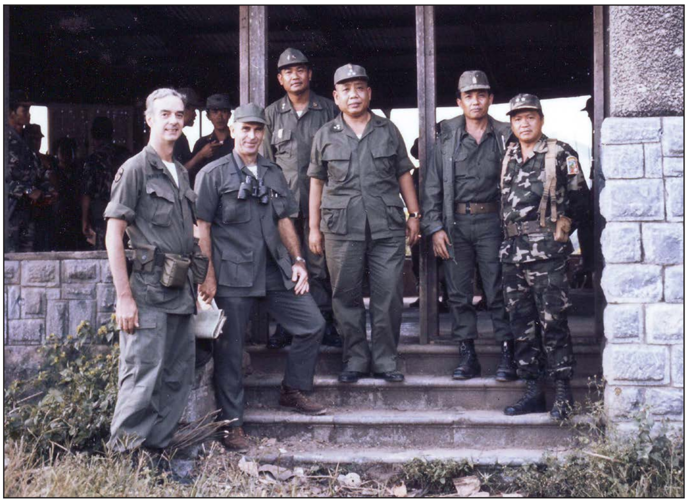
US embassy officials inspect elements of the 1st Strike Division pushing north along Route 13 in M35 2.5-ton trucks toward Sala Phou Khoun, early December 1972. The US Army Attaché's UH-1H has been temporarily fitted with M60 machine guns; normally it flew unarmed. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)



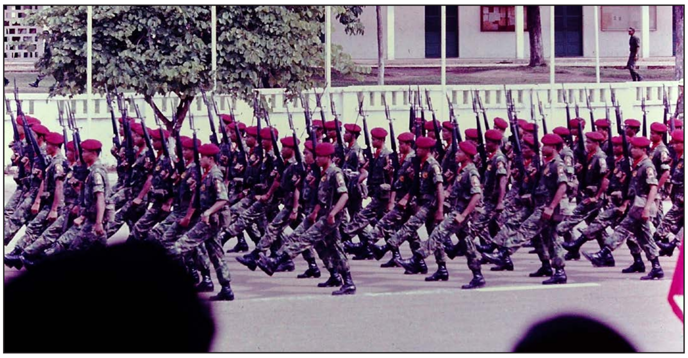
Flag of the 2nd Strike Division that hung at Seno Airbase, 1973. This was designed by Lieutenant Khammoung Santy, a paratrooper who also designed the insignia for SPECOM and the 7th Airborne Brigade. (Photo courtesy Khammoung Santy)



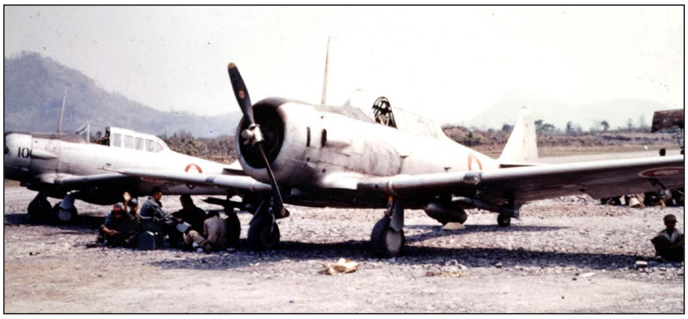
Major General Bounphone in dress whites, 1971. (Author's collection)



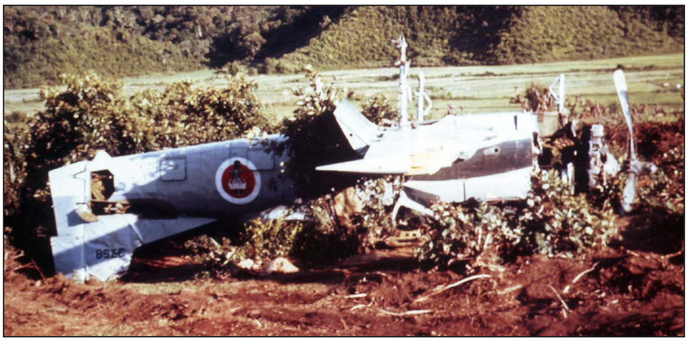
Senior FAR officers and US officials inspect elements of the 1st Strike Division at the Sala Phou Khoun crossroads, early December 1972. From left to right: Colonel Broadus Bailey, US Army Attaché; Brigadier General John Vessey, DepChief; Brigadier General Thonglith, MR 5 commander; Major General Kouprasith, FAR deputy commander; Brigadier General Sengsouvanh, FAN commander; and Brigadier General Bounchanh, 1st Strike Division commander. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)



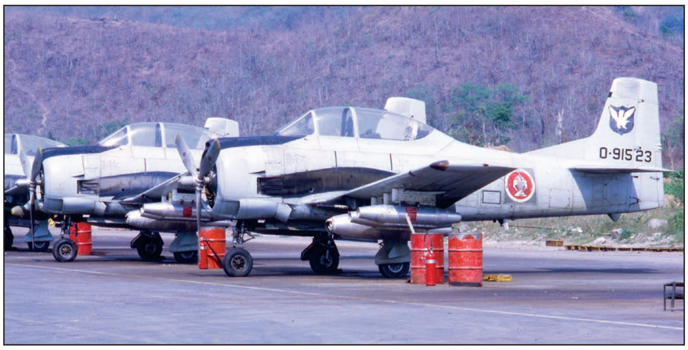
SPECOM commandos parade in Luang Prabang during the Lao New Year celebration, April 1973. The yellow SPECOM scorpion insignia can be seen on their left shirt pockets. (Photo courtesy Lee Miles)



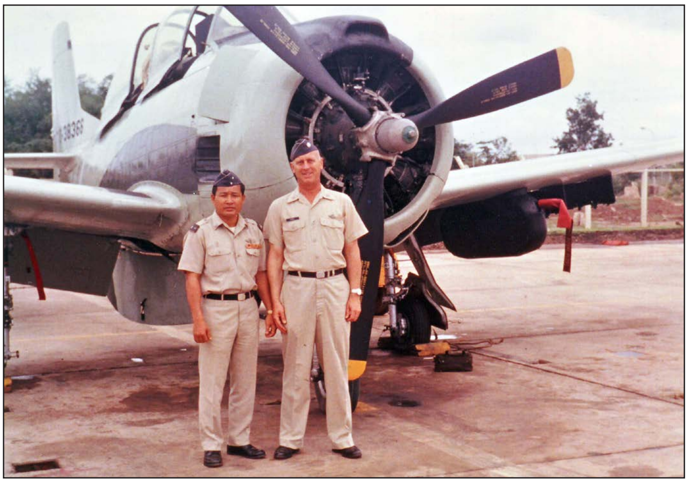
A pair of RLAF T-6s at Wattay, circa 1961. (Photo courtesy Albert Grandolini)



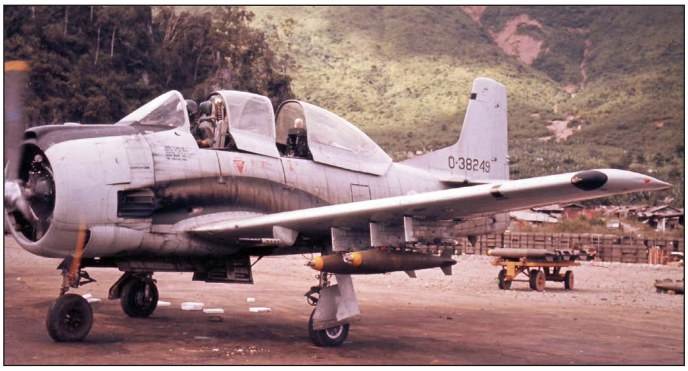
An RLAF T-28 flown by Air America pilot Dick Nolan after making an emergency landing at Nakhang, 14 May 1965. Nolan had been hit by anti-aircraft fire during a search-and-rescue mission over MR 2. (Author's collection)



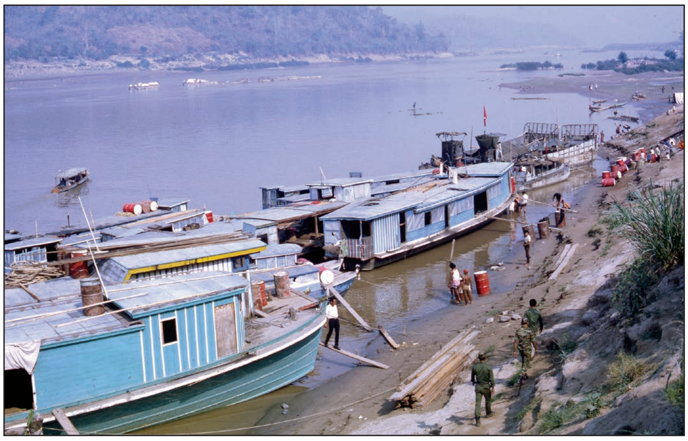
T-28s on the Luang Prabang tarmac featuring the eagle tail logo unique to that airbase, mid-1967. T-28 O-921523 in 1970 had its erawan roundel removed and was used by USAF Ravens at a FAC plane. (Photo © David Jenkins, used with permission)



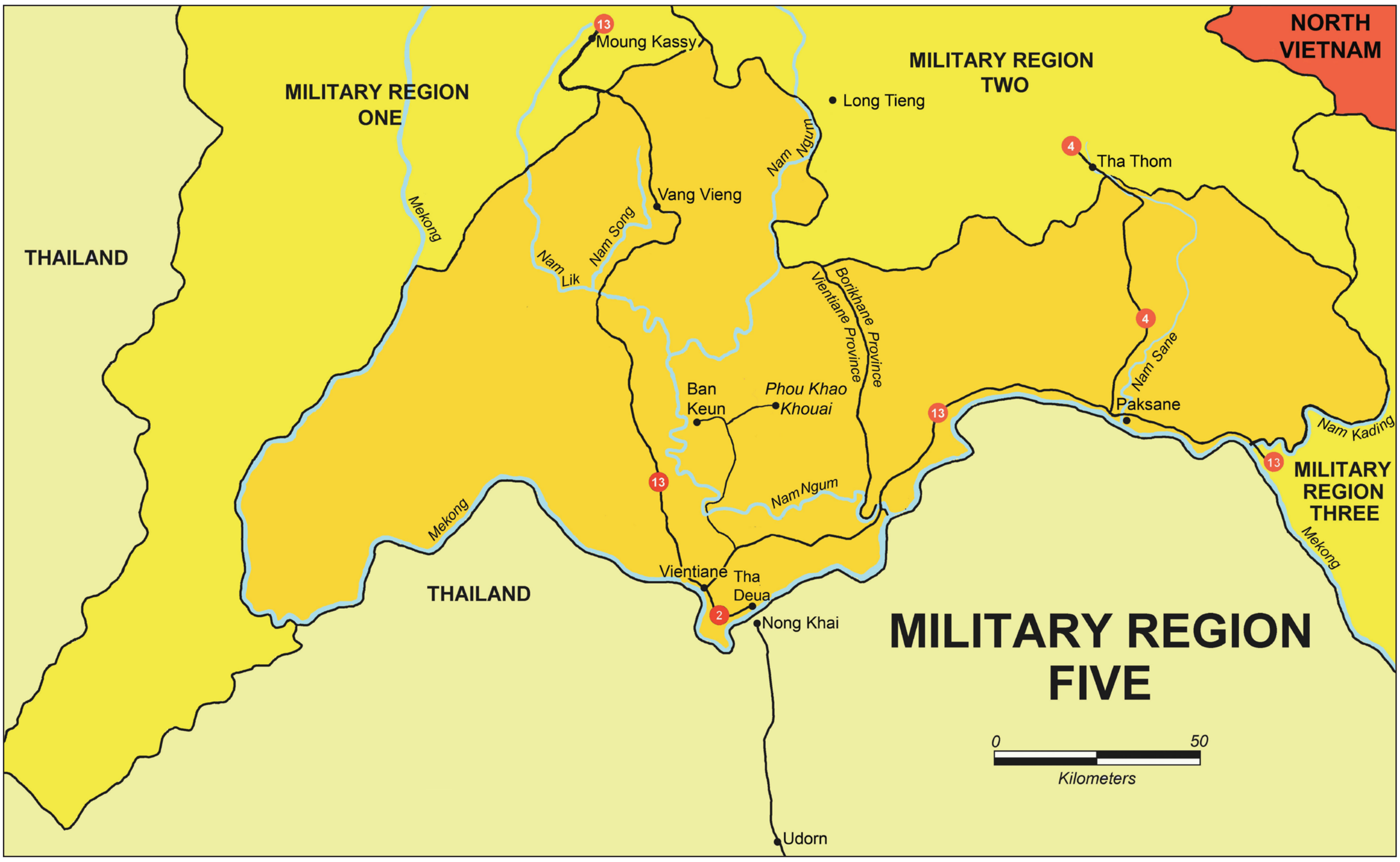
Lieutenant Colonel William Ritchie, the Waterpump commander, poses with Brigadier General Sourith Don Sasorith at Udorn RTAFB, 1967. They wear practically identical USAF-style blue flight caps and khaki tan summer uniforms, except Sourith has added epaulettes to his shirt. RLAF more often wore a light khaki grey summer uniform. (Photo courtesy William Ritchie)



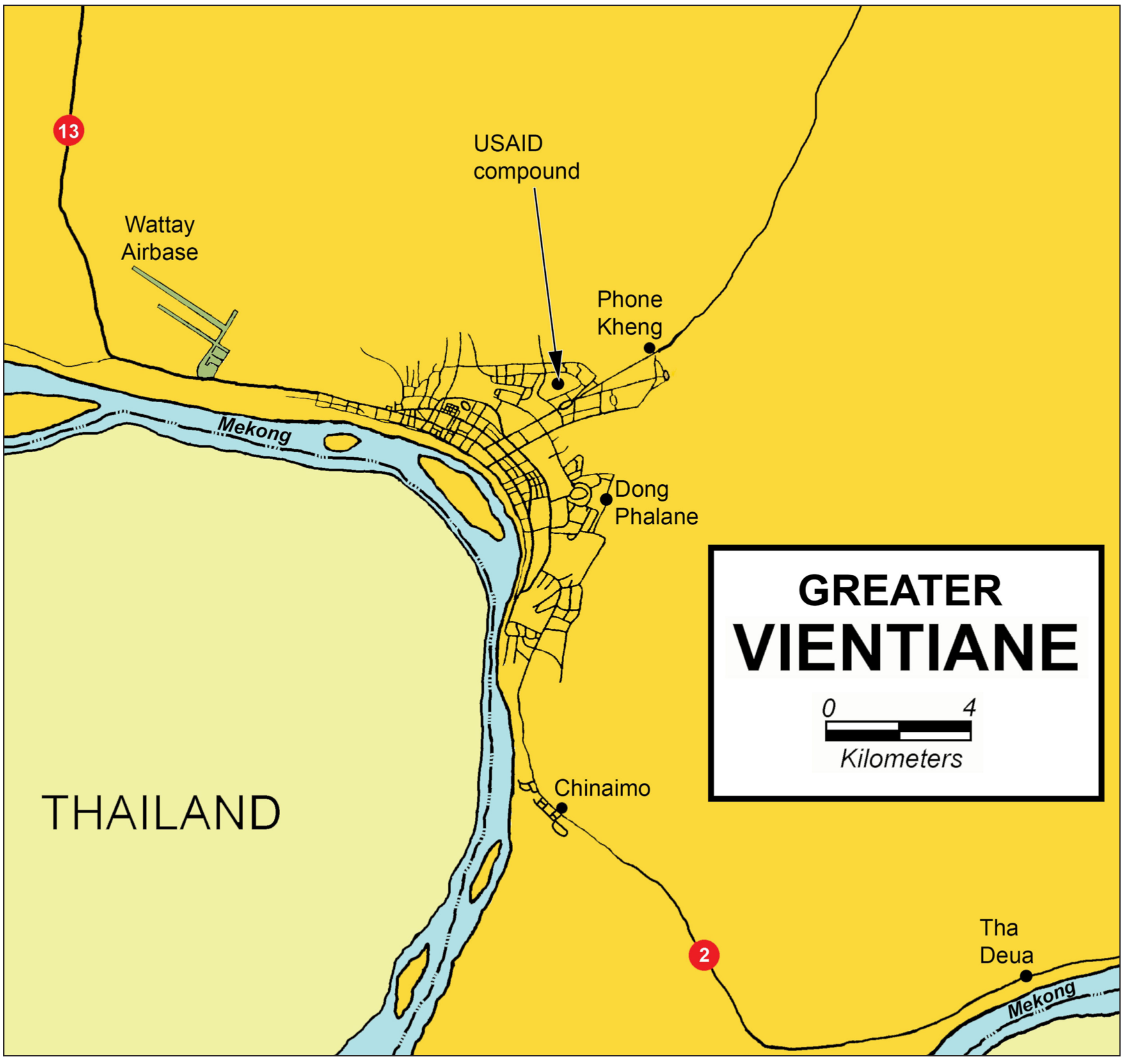
A T-28D-5 armed with underwing .50-calibre machine guns and 250-lb Mk 81 bombs at Long Tieng, September 1972. In the background looms the denuded summit of Skyline Two Ridge. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)



A FOM 11 and two LCM landing craft escort a flotilla of cargo boats from Luang Prabang to Ban Houei Sai, 1967. (Photo © David Jenkins, used with permission)


NORTH VIETNAM
MILITARY REGION TWO
MILITARY REGION ONE
13
Moung Kassy
Long Tieng
4
Tha Thom
Mekong
Vang Vieng
Nam Ngum
THAILAND
Nam Song
Nam Lik
Borikhane Province
Vientiane Province
4
Nam Sane
Ban Keun
Phou Khao Khouai
13
Paksane
Nam Kading
13
MILITARY REGION THREE
13
Nam Ngum
Mekong
Mekong
Vientiane
Tha Deua
2
Nong Khai
THAILAND
MILITARY REGION FIVE
0
50
Kilometers
Udorn

Map of Military Region 5 showing its boundary from 1965-1975. From 1959-1965, Bourikhane Province was part of Military Region 2. (Map by Ken Conboy)


13
USAID compound
Wattay Airbase
Phone Kheng
Mekong
Dong Phalane
GREATER VIENTIANE
0
4
Kilometers
THAILAND
Chinaimo
2
Tha Deua
Mekong

Map of Vientiane municipality showing the disposition of Wattay Airbase and the MR 5 headquarters at Chinaimo. (Map by Ken Conboy)

FAR engineer troops move a pallet of 155mm artillery shells at Moung Kassy, March 1970. The soldier in the foreground is wearing the 'clouds' camouflage used by the South Vietnamese National Police Field Force – a testament to the FAR's highly varied supply chain. (Author's collection)

The interior of the Combined Operations Center at Phone Kheng, 1970. On the wall are plaques of the RLAF and various FAR technical branches. (Photo courtesy William Keeler)

On 1 July, Off Balance kicked off on schedule. Unfortunately, the FAN troops barely moved, leading the Hmong and paratroopers to advance on their own. After half a month with little to show for the effort, the operation was brought to a close. As a consequence of their dismal showing, all FAN were airlifted from Xieng Dat to Moung Kassy.

Still unfazed, Vang Pao reworked his rainy season plans into a new operation codenamed Kou Kiet. Rather than the earlier limited affairs, however, Kou Kiet was envisioned as a grand multi-pronged assault on the PDJ. When it finally kicked off on 6 August, it included one all-FAR task force – composed of 101 BP, BV 21, and BV 24 – which began moving northeast from Ban Na toward Moung Phanh. A large portion of all the Kou Kiet forces, FAR as well as irregulars, were equipped with M16 rifles, secret shipments of which started arriving from South Vietnam in mid-June.

After one month, Kou Kiet had succeeded far beyond expectations. Though most of the heavy lifting had been accomplished by irregular forces, the FAR column targeted against Moung Phanh had performed admirably. Even the FAR in MR 5 had jumped on Kou Kiet's coattails and launched Operation Frontier Field, a single-battalion thrust up Route 4 and into Tha Thom. Virtually unopposed, Frontier Field's lone participant, BI 10, had reached Ta Vieng by 21 October.

Southern Discomfort

In the southern reaches of the kingdom, a similar pattern of combat was unfolding. There, too, CIA-backed irregulars were shouldering the brunt of fighting and realising unexpected gains, with the FAR relegated to only token participation. During Operation Junction City Junior in MR 3, for example, multiple guerrilla battalions moved deep into communist-held territory around Moung Phine. FAR's lone contribution – BC 203 – did little other than perform the symbolic duty of raising the RLG flag over Moung Phine on 13 September.

In MR 4, irregular forces had grown especially active across the strategic Bolovens Plateau. One exception was the town of Thateng, where FAR defenders from BV 46 were getting hard hit through the first quarter of 1969. To add backbone to the tired Thateng

As CIA-backed guerrillas secured control over Saravane on 28 July 1971, the FAR top brass – cameramen in tow – quickly arrived to view the liberated town. On the left is the RLAF commander, Brigadier General Sourith Don Sasorith. In the centre is the newly-promoted FAR commander, Major General Bounpone Marthepharak. The acting defence minister, Sisouk Na Champassak, is on the right with pipe in mouth. (Author's collection)

defenders, General Phasouk made the decision to dispatch his premier FAR battalion, BI 7. Previously part of GM 19 at Thakhek, BI 7 had been snatched by Phasouk after the 1968 FAR reorganisation and effectively converted into his palace guard: the commander – Lieutenant Colonel Nhot Phouthavong – was formerly Phasouk's personal medic, and the troops had been treated to training stints at Lopburi and – at Phasouk's insistence – the Airborne Training Centre at Seno.

Boarding Air America and RLAF H-34s (the latter part of the US Embassy's ongoing attempts to coax greater Lao involvement in major tactical airlifts), BI 7 was choppered on 11 February to a hilltop landing zone three kilometres southwest of Thateng. There the airborne troops established recoilless rifle and mortar positions, providing covering fire that enabled RLAF H-34s to evacuate wounded and deliver supplies to the fort below.

From the arrival of BI 7 through the end of March, North Vietnamese attacks dropped off. Just as the future brightened, however, on 4 April BV 46 deserted without warning. Suddenly, BI 7 found itself alone on its hilltop perch. That was not necessarily a bad development, because it still allowed BI 7 to seal access to the Bolovens from its vantage above Route 23. The battalion saw it that way for nearly a month; then, in a sad repudiation of their allegedly elite status, the airborne troops pulled back without orders and returned to their cushy quarters near Pakse.

Spreading the Pain

After the tremendous success of Operation Kou Kiet, Vang Pao had spent the fourth quarter of 1969 working on a tactical plan to defend his PDJ holdings through the upcoming dry season. This took on an added political dimension in December, when Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma insisted that the FAN be offered a foothold on the PDJ as compensation for their Moung Soui losses in June.

For the occasion, the FAN established its first infantry regiment, *Régiment d'Infanterie* (RI) 305, under the command of Colonel Soulivanh. The regiment was given nominal control over two battalions: BC 208, which had returned in October from training in Thailand and since had been posted to Tha Thom; and BI 19, a new, Thai-trained conglomeration of Moung Soui remnants. On 3 December, BI 19 and the RI 305 headquarters were lifted to the Lima 22 airfield on the central PDJ, not coincidentally, the same day Souvanna Phouma turned up for his first tour of the PDJ in half a decade.

For the next two months, these Neutralists remained on the plain as a mobile reserve. On 20 February, as the King of Laos was scheduled to fly to Lima 22 to hand out field promotions to FAR and FAN troops, the ceremony was abruptly cancelled when North Vietnamese 122mm rockets began to hit the airfield. That night the rocket barrage was followed by a ground assault against the northern perimeter, defended by a handful of FAN troops assigned to the RI 305 headquarters. Surprisingly effective counterfire from Neutralist gunners turned back the North Vietnamese attackers.

The following morning, the communists returned – this time with PT-76 tanks. Hearing the approaching armour, the Neutralists spoke with their feet and quickly streamed south through the rest of the garrison. The poor FAN showing, in fact, was several weeks in the making. As Neutralists rubbed shoulders at Lima 22 with better fed, better equipped, and better paid CIA-sponsored troops, they developed a grudge against the pampered irregulars. When the heat got too hot, the demoralised Neutralists were all too quick to throw in the towel.

After steamrolling across the rest of the plain, the North Vietnamese set their sights on Moung Soui. After being retaken the previous autumn during Kou Kiet, it had grown in importance as the main T-28 staging base in MR 2. Now protected by just a company of Hmong guerrillas, it was quickly abandoned on 22 February.

Toward these negative developments around the PDJ, the FAR top brass barely stirred. More worrisome to their minds was the spectre of a communist task force continuing past Moung Soui to the Sala Phou Khoun junction. By the second week in March 1970, four FAR battalions were deployed on the junction with 'orders to defend to the last man.' General Kouprasith, in a typical waffle, vowed to hold Sala Phou Khoun, 'unless he [had] to abandon it.'

Back in MR 2, the communists by March had rolled up to the doorstep of Vang Pao's guerrilla headquarters at Long Tieng. Among the reinforcements dispatched to the region was an MR 3 composite battalion composed of companies from five FAR battalions. Composite battalions, which borrowed squads and platoons from units across the military region, were a uniquely FAR solution to extra-regional assignments; rather than incur bad blood with any single battalion, MR commanders would spread the pain and call on several units to contribute men under a composite arrangement. Of course, composite battalion commanders had little control over their ad hoc formations, and such battalions were normally discounted as little more than warm bodies in the field.

During May as North Vietnamese troops besieged the MR 2 garrison at Bouamlong, Vang Pao again relied on a FAR composite battalion, this one from MR 4. Officially dubbed *Bataillon Mobile* (BM) IV, command was given to the head of BV 48 in Champassac, himself an officer of dubious ability. Already a month in the field (they had arrived in MR 2 on 1 April), the composite contingent immediately balked at the prospect of serving a second month away from home. Four days after they arrived at Bouamlong, 116 dissidents from the battalion demanded – and got – an airlift back to Pakse.

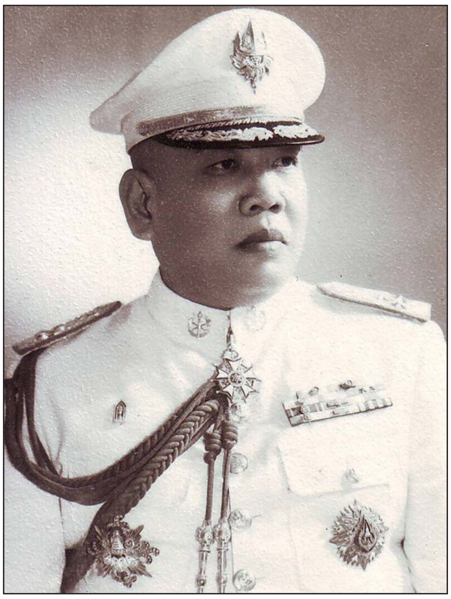
Major General Phasouk visits Saravane on the day of its liberation from North Vietnamese forces, 28 July 1971. Although he had been promoted from MR 4 commander to FAR chief of staff on 1 July, Phasouk was reluctant to leave his powerbase and did not hand over control to Colonel Soutchay Vongsavanh until 14 August. (Author's collection)

The use of composite battalions was not limited to MR 2. Down in MR 4, General Phasouk, the MR 4 commander, had seen his grip over the entire region fast unravel as Hanoi – looking to expand its hold over the Lao corridor to compensate for the loss of the accommodating Sihanouk government in Cambodia in March 1970 – blitzed the provincial capital of Attopeu in April and then overran the town of Saravane in June. In mid-July, the North Vietnamese shifted their attention to Khong Island on the Cambodian border. As Khong Island was far on the periphery, many speculated that Phasouk was prepared to write it off as a loss.

What Phasouk had not taken into consideration was the fact that Khong Island was the traditional homeland of the Abhays, strongly represented in the FAR hierarchy by the influential MR 5 commander, General Kouprasith. By 20 July, the heretofore miserly Kouprasith collected two of his battalions, BI 6 and BC 206, plus two 105mm howitzers and had them winging down to his home island. In addition, Kouprasith ordered the formation of an MR 5 composite battalion for duties south. To round out FAR reinforcements, MR 3 coughed up BC 203, sporting a fresh commander after its Junction City Junior non-performance. These four battalions, together with the island's resident BV 49 (long controlled by the Abhay family) were gathered under a new tactical grouping, GT 402. Command of the GT was given to Bouathong Phothivongsa, a respected colonel and graduate of the French War College. Suddenly facing this critical mass of troops, the North Vietnamese sought softer targets and allowed stability to return to the island.

Year of Living Dangerously

Over the course of 1971, the tempo of the war in Laos rose exponentially. As before, CIA-backed irregulars shouldered the brunt of fighting. In a handful of cases, however, FAR and FAN made significant contributions.



Major General Kouprasith Abhay, the FAR deputy commander, in dress whites circa 1971. He wears decorations from Thailand (left pocket), France (below the neck), and Laos (right pocket). The top graduate of the second OCS class at Dong Hene, Kouprasith in 1954 became the first Lao officer to attend the French Army's Staff School. In 1957, he was named the first defence attaché to France, then in 1960 became MR 5 commander for 11 years. (Photo courtesy Kouprasith Abhay)

One such example was in MR 3, where the communists – looking to enhance their diplomatic leverage amid rumours of impending peace negotiations – sought to capture RLG-held Dong Hene, then drive on Kengkok and rocket Seno. To counter this, the CIA's Savannakhet Unit, which had most of its forces deployed to other regions, managed to scrounge together a little more than a regiment. The MR 3 FAR headquarters, meanwhile, offered up elements of eight battalions, two towed 105mm howitzers, two aged M24 tanks, and a pair of M706 armoured cars. With this mixed force, plans were finalised for Operation Phoutah (Lao for 'Grandfather'): the

Statue outside the MR 3 headquarters, 1970. The crossed sword design on the base was the logo for MR 3. (Photo courtesy Joe Bossi)

rainy season defence of Dong Hene, to be followed by a drive on Moung Phalane.

In the end, Phoutah dragged on from May through September. FAR primarily protected the rear near Dong Hene, losing both tanks in the process. While Dong Hene remained in friendly hands, RLG forces were never able to evict the North Vietnamese from Moung Phalane.

In MR 1, a major government operation was launched in February 1971 after North Vietnamese troops overwhelmed a string of RLG positions northeast of the royal capital. As the attacks concerned the King, this hit a raw nerve in Vientiane. A kingdom-wide call went out for reinforcements, to which the normally stingy MR commanders lent a sympathetic ear. From Vientiane, BC 205 boarded planes and was whisked north. From the panhandle, 101 BP, at Pakse preparing for deployment on the Bolovens, was instead rushed to the royal capital.

Both battalions assembled on the Luang Prabang runway, then marched 14 kilometres north to blocking positions near the King's farm. There the front line stabilised for the ensuing month. On 22 March, however, Vietnamese troops blitzed the vicinity. By nightfall, FAR infantry and paratroopers were streaming into Luang Prabang from outlying posts.

As dawn broke on 23 March, the North Vietnamese 335th Independent Regiment was eight kilometres northeast of the royal capital and closing in. This set off an emergency call for more reinforcements. CIA irregulars arrived from multiple regions. FAR displayed similar largesse. At Pakse, Phasouk began forming yet another composite infantry battalion. From Sayaboury came BV 14. Vientiane sent BI 6. The Armoured Brigade gave five M706 armoured cars, and the Artillery Regiment lent 105mm and 155mm howitzers.

The Neutralists, too, had deep pockets. On 25 March, FAN dispatched from Vang Vieng BIs 15 and 17. Both were grouped into a newly designated regiment, RI 302, headed by Colonel Soulivanh, earlier the commander of the ill-fated FAN regiment at Lima 22 on the PDJ.

BI 6 disembarks from USAF 21st Special Operations Squadron CH-53 choppers on the Moung Soui airstrip during Operation Golden Mountain, 25 September 1971. (Photo courtesy Wick Tourison)

Troops from BI 6 manoeuvre away from the Moung Soui airstrip during Operation Golden Mountain, 25 September 1971. The UH-1D overflying the runway was one of three choppers based at Udorn RTAFB that were used in support of the US Army Attaché's office in Vientiane. (Photo courtesy Wick Tourison)

Quickly, a joint staff combining FAR, FAN, and CIA irregulars produced a defensive plan called Operation Xieng Dong. Two of the prongs would be comprised of irregulars; FAR was grouped in the third. Xieng Dong proved a total success, throwing back the North Vietnamese from the Luang Prabang sector and hobbling the 335th Independent Regiment in the process.

In MR 2, the North Vietnamese opened their dry season offensive in early 1971 by sending tanks and artillery against a FAN battalion that had been once again posted to Moung Soui. Within a day the Neutralists were on the run, leaving behind four 75mm pack howitzers.

Six months later, Moung Soui was again in the news. This was due to a belated contribution from MR 5. On 5 August 1971, a FAR task force had assembled at Moung Kassy consisting of BC 206 from Paksane, BI 6 from Vientiane, and elements of the MR 5 Commandos. (The latter consisted of three companies of airborne troops trained in Thailand that primarily acted as MR 5's symbolic contribution to far-flung battlefields.) Under the overall command of Colonel Inphanh Luanglat, a long-time paratrooper now serving as the MR 5 chief of staff, the task force was to work its way north to Sala Phou Khoun, then swing east toward Moung Soui.

Moving easily from Moung Kassy to Sala Phou Khoun, FAR's drive slowed to a crawl in the face of heavy rains and light communist resistance. After two weeks without progress, the troops were finally cajoled into heading east through the mountains south of, and parallel to, Route 7. Covering 15 kilometres, the task force ran into a Pathet Lao battalion and immediately ground to a halt. Stuck there through mid-September, the three units loaded into choppers and leapfrogged over the Pathet Lao into the abandoned village of Xieng Dat.

Regrouping for three days, the task force was given the operational name Phou Khao Kham ('Golden Mountain') and readied for an air-assault into Moung Soui. In preparation, 62 MR 2 guerrillas on 24 September were shuttled by a pair of USAF CH-53s into the hills six kilometres south of the town. With A-1s circling overhead, the MR 2 troops converged inside Moung Soui by dusk.

Early the following morning, six Knives assembled at Xieng Dat and began onloading BI 6. With RLAF T-28s and USAF jets covering their infiltration, the FAR troops landed on the Moung Soui runway. RLAF and Air America choppers soon joined the armada, lifting in BC 206. The MR 5 Commandos, led by Captain Phoumoung Abhay – Kouprasith's stepbrother – arrived by noon. Apart from some light machine gun and mortar fire, communist troops in the vicinity melted north without a fight. Morale high, the MR 5 troops garrisoned the town for a month before being replaced by FAR's BV 27.

Back to the Wall

During the second half of 1971, Vang Pao once again led his guerrilla forces across the PDJ. Though not a success on the scale of 1969's Kou Kiet, it still allowed the general to establish a network of interlocking firebases across the western half of the plain.

Trouble was, when Vang Pao looked to establish a reserve force to bolster his forces on the PDJ, few of his normal sources of troops were amenable. This was because a major campaign to retake the Bolovens was in full swing at the time, so CIA irregulars from MRs 3 and 4 were otherwise engaged. FAN also offered nobody. FAR lent only four M706 armoured cars, flown in to patrol the immediate perimeter around the Moung Phanh airfield.

In December 1971, the North Vietnamese responded to Vang Pao's PDJ build-up with a massive offensive combining infantry, armour, and long-range artillery. In the opening phase of this attack, the FAR M706 crews abandoned their scout cars and ran west. One week later, the USAF bombed the four intact vehicles to prevent them from entering the communist inventory.

After crushing the RLG defences on the PDJ, by the close of December the North Vietnamese were on the doorstep of Long Tieng. Concurrently, Pathet Lao and Patriotic Neutralist forces began laying siege to the Sala Phou Khoun crossroads on 30 December. Facing them were two FAN battalions – BVs 25 and 58 – and a FAR 105mm howitzer battery. Belatedly deciding that these defences were not enough, the FAR General Staff in mid-January 1972 ordered north the Vientiane-based 11th Brigade from the newly formed 1st Strike Division. After the brigade was assembled at Vang Vieng, the FAR troopers were choppered to the junction – just in time to be overrun on 21 January. Neutralists and Royalists both took to the bush, leaving behind the four howitzers. By the following morning, 122mm rockets were falling on Moung Kassy. Nine days after that, Pathet Lao troops occupied Kiou Kacham. The communists, it seemed, were expanding their hold along Route 13 at will.

In a somewhat tardy response, task forces from MRs 1 and 5 teamed up for Operation Maharat (Lao for 'Great King'), a double-pronged attempt to clear Route 13 of Pathet Lao and Patriotic Neutralists. For the southern half of the Maharat pincer, FAR contributed BV 52, BV 56, two M706 armoured cars, and artillery, while FAN added BV 25 and BC 208. For the northern half of Maharat, the CIA's Luang Prabang Unit offered three guerrilla battalions and its airborne Commando Raiders. MR 5 commander Thonglith was placed in overall charge.

On 10 March 1972, Luang Prabang's paramilitary troops kicked off Maharat by moving onto a mountain 30 kilometres west of Sala Phou Khoun. These troops leapfrogged closer by chopper over the next six days. Then, as Thonglith's column advanced from the south, the Luang Prabang task force was helilifted into the hills overlooking Sala Phou Khoun from the west. In short order, Maharat sped to an anti-climax as a Luang Prabang battalion walked onto the intersection and linked up with road-bound troops. Sala Phou Khoun, they found, was already abandoned by communist forces.

7

REBUILDING AN ARMY

By 1969, the year in which the CIA's irregular forces scored some of their biggest victories, FAR had dropped to a qualitative low. The reasons for this were legion. First, corruption was eating away at the Royalist ranks. A case in point was the proliferation of phantom troops. Of the 51,000 Royalist troops listed on the payroll in January 1970, an estimated one in five did not exist. Another case in point was the involvement of several senior generals in gambling dens, narcotics, smuggling – and even commodities trading with their enemy, the Pathet Lao.

Second, the Lao army was wedded to exceedingly poor tactics. One example of this was that almost all FAR military operations were essentially defensive in nature, always allowing the North Vietnamese to choose the time and place of attack. Another example was that FAR artillery crews rarely ventured outside static positions near large towns, and on the few occasions that howitzers were within range to support infantry forces, a lack of trained forward observers led to chronic inaccuracy.

Third, FAR had more than its share of substandard equipment. Most of its armoured vehicles, for example, were of Second World War vintage and near the end of their operational lives; age, shoddy maintenance, and lack of spare parts all were taking a heavy toll.

Last, FAR was facing a manpower pinch. Many of its respected officers – especially those from airborne units – were transferring to the CIA's irregular forces in MRs 3 and 4, which offered such perks as better pay and higher food allowances. In addition, with six percent of the total population already fighting under the FAR/FAN banner (not to mention irregular forces), the RLG was fast running out of eligible male recruits.

Along with their Royalist compatriots, the Neutralists were also in a slump. In mid-1968, FAN troops had been ejected from their main base in the south, Lao Ngam. One year later, FAN was evicted from its northern stronghold, Moung Soui. Except for a pocket at Vang Vieng and another along Route 13 near Khong Sedone, the Neutralist army was little more than a tactical footnote.

Recognising these major deficiencies, by late 1969 the US was expending considerable effort to realise improvements in the Lao armed forces. A heavy emphasis was placed on better training for the FAR. During Fiscal Year 1970, for example, 100 FAR junior officers were sent to a Special Officers' Leadership Course at Fort Knox, Kentucky. In addition, entire FAR battalions continued to receive refresher training in Thailand under Project 009; four Lao battalions were scheduled to recycle through the program in fiscal 1970. During the same year, three 100-man FAR companies were sent for commando and airborne training at Lopburi.

Boosting FAR, too, was an influx of better equipment. In August 1969, for example, Project 404 advisors in MRs 2 and 3 began training a cadre of Lao M16 rifle instructors, who that fall helped to integrate the new rifle into

RTA Major General Dhonnadit Sudhides (left), the deputy commander of Thai volunteers in Laos, reviews FAN troops at Vang Vieng, mid-1972. Due to heavy North Vietnamese attacks on Long Tieng during the first quarter of 1972, the centre for logistical and air support for MR 2 shifted to the government base at Ban Son. But after Ban Son was hit by heavy flooding, logistical operations in July 1972 were forced to shift once more – this time to the FAN base at Vang Vieng. This FAN honour guard is equipped with M1 Carbines and M26 fragmentation grenades. (Photo courtesy Dhonnadit Sudhides)

FAR. During the same period, older PRC-10 radios were exchanged for later model PRC-25s.

Other improved weapons systems were in the pipeline. In late 1969, 25 FAR instructors completed M60 machine gun training at Pranburi. In addition, 76 FAR students were dispatched to the RTA Artillery Center at Kokethiem for training in M706 armoured car tactics and maintenance under the auspices of a US Army mobile training team. By mid-March 1970, the first two of an eventual 15 M706s, including several XM706E2 open-topped versions, were turned over to the FAR 1st Armoured Brigade. These were ultimately divided five apiece to the 1st Recce Squadron at Luang Prabang, 2nd Recce Squadron at Vientiane, and 4th Recce Squadron at Pakse.

In FAN major changes were also enacted during the second half of 1969. First, Colonel Sengsouvanh Souvannarath, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's nephew, was recalled from Paris after completing the French War College and named FAN commander in chief on 6 September 1969. (Sengsouvanh was the brother of Sisouvanh, the Moung Hiem commander killed in 1966.) Second, tattered elements from the overrun Moung Soui garrison were flown to Lopburi for a one-time retraining surge. Third, FAN abolished all its *groupements mobiles* and instead created the first in a series of RIs under new, more competent officers. Three regiments were eventually formed: RI 302 at Luang Prabang, RI 304 in MR 4, and RI 305 on the PDJ. Last, the FAN headquarters was moved inside Phone Kheng, allowing the FAR General Staff to assume de facto tactical control over both Royalist and Neutralist units.

Lao-ization

Despite the efforts made in 1969, the next major engagement involving FAR and FAN troops – the defence of the PDJ in February 1970 – was a total bust. At Lima 22, in particular, the Neutralists of RI 305, rubbing shoulders with Hmong irregulars, were left demoralised by what they perceived as significantly better support afforded the irregular forces. When the North Vietnamese struck, FAN folded with barely a fight.

For those tracking the progress of FAR and FAN, the poor performance on the PDJ came at a most inopportune moment. The prevailing politico-military climate, after all, pointed toward an imminent US exit from Southeast Asian battlefields. Already, Saigon was being rushed by Washington along the road toward self-sufficiency – 'Vietnamization' – for the day when it would alone face North Vietnam. With similar improvement demanded of the Lao armed forces, the US Embassy in Vientiane was under pressure to show gains.

Given this direction, the embassy redoubled its efforts over the remainder of 1970. First, attention was paid to logistical support. Starting in March 1970, the RO initiated steps toward placing both regular and irregular Lao forces under a single Pentagon supply umbrella. This merger, which took two years to complete, put all RLG troops on an equal logistical playing field.

Second, a concerted effort was made at enhancing in-country training. Earlier, a Commando Training Centre had been established in September 1968 at Dong Hene. In theory, company-size units from across the kingdom were to rotate through the base. The idea, however, failed to catch imaginations and fell flat.

Not until two years later was the concept of a national training centre resurrected. Rather than Dong Hene, however, the new Combat Arms Training Centre (CATC) was to be established at Phou Khao Khouai, the old DNC base.

Larger than the Dong Hene centre, the CATC contained the FAR infantry, commando, and artillery schools and was initially envisioned as capable of handling one commando company and two infantry battalions at the same time. Targeted for opening by 1 September 1970, the base was set to assume nationwide battalion-level training within two years, making Project 009 in Thailand unnecessary by 1973.

As cadre for the training centre, a 300-man Lao staff was assembled, composed primarily of those who had attended Ranger training at Fort Benning and the Special Forces course at Fort Bragg. On 29 October 1970, slightly behind schedule, the Phou Khao Khouai CATC was officially opened. Three months later, the first FAR battalion, BV 57, entered its gates for a 10-week refresher cycle, followed by a pair of battalions (including 101 BP from Savannakhet) bloodied that spring at Luang Prabang.

Third, the FAR General Staff, responding to US pressure, created a national reserve theoretically available for kingdom-wide deployment rather than the more limited concerns of the individual MR commanders. Officially termed *Force Générale d'Intervention* (General Intervention Force), this reserve was composed of three commando battalions, each formed from the remnants of an ex-GM 15 airborne battalion crushed at Nambac in January 1968. The old 55 BP, now called BC 204, was stationed at Luang Prabang. The 1 BP, now named BC 206, was posted to Paksane. Last, 11 BP, renamed BC 205, had for nearly two years tried to attract recruits at Xieng Ngeun, and then in Vientiane. Unsuccessful, the FAR General Staff transferred more than 400 military police into its ranks, and then in February 1970 sent the battalion to Project 009 training at Pranburi. Returning after three months, BC 205 was immediately dispatched to Bouamlong in MR 2, where it performed credibly and gave an early boost to the national reserve concept.

Therein lay the primary dilemma of the RLG: it lacked a national army. Increasingly, battalions remained firmly under the thumb of MR commanders, who selfishly held on to their assets like warlords. The loyalty of soldiers remained tied to their hometowns or villages, and desertions tended to increase in direct proportion to the length of time units were deployed away from the soldiers' families.

Previous attempts by the FAR General Headquarters to rectify this situation by forming a truly national army responsive to its control had only achieved partial success. In the mid-1960s, the two airborne *groupements mobiles* had been intended for this role, only to be disbanded in 1968. During 1969, the three independent parachute battalions at Seno inherited the portfolio; in practice, however, rarely was more than one at a time deployed outside its MR 3 homebase. More recently had come the three-battalion General Intervention Force; being physically divided among three towns, however, its commando battalions spent most of their time wedded to their respective garrisons.

There things might have remained had it not been for a wholesale renovation of the FAR leadership on 1 July 1971. Orchestrated by acting Defence Minister Sisouk Na Champassac, the shakeup – most sweeping since 1965 – hinged on the retirement of the commander in chief, Lieutenant General Ouane Rathikoun. Replacing him was MR 3's Major General Bounpone. At the same time, Major Generals Phasouk (whose performance had been slipping since early 1970) and Kouprasith (ever the political animal) were both removed as region commanders and given the administrative posts of FAR chief of staff and deputy commander in chief, respectively.

Among the military regions, Brigadier General Thonglith, ambitious as he was ruthless, finally emerged from Kouprasith's shadow and was charged with MR 5. In MR 4 was the US favourite, Colonel Soutchay. Elevated in MR 3 was the xenophobic Colonel Nouphet Daoheuang. No changes came to MR 2, firmly under

Discussions about the integration of CIA-supported irregular units into the 2nd Strike Division, early 1973. From left to right are Brigadier General Ratanabanlang Choumpholphakdy, deputy commander of MR 3; Brigadier General Nouphet Daoheuang, commander of Military Region 3; and Brigadier General Soutchay Vongsavanh, commander of Military Region 4. (Photo courtesy Tom Roberts via James Morrison)

Vang Pao's thumb. Similarly, Tiao Sayavong, the affable brother of the King, remained as MR 1 commander; in as his new deputy was Colonel Chao Sinh Saysana, a highly respected officer coming off a tour as military attaché in Saigon.

Of these changes, nearly all were positive. At the top, Bounpone, in contrast to his predecessor, was untainted by narcotics production and gold smuggling. Many of the other new faces were younger and deemed more capable.

With this fresh cast, the concept of a national reserve force got a sudden boost. By the last day of August 1971, the FAR General Staff approved plans to create two *divisions d'infanterie d'intervention* – strike divisions – which would be responsive to Phone Kheng and not any single MR commander. Each division would have three brigades, with each brigade composed of three battalions.

Within weeks, the 1st Strike Division, to be responsible for the northern half of the kingdom, began to take shape. Tapped to head the new unit was Brigadier General Bounchanh, the Luang Prabang native who had fare poorly as the Nambac operational commander. Following that debacle, he remained in MR 1 as the region's deputy commander until replaced by Colonel Chao Sinh.

With Bounchanh establishing his headquarters in Vientiane, the division was physically divided into three: 11th Brigade located at Vientiane; 12th Brigade at Luang Prabang; and 13th Brigade at Paksane. Each brigade headquarters was given control over three existing FAR commando or infantry battalions within its respective garrison town. Luang Prabang's 12th Brigade, for example, was allocated BC 204, BI 1, and BI 3. Except for support elements, then, the 1st Strike Division had its rosters full before year's end.

Dedicated for the southern part of the kingdom was the 2nd Strike Division. Command was given to the highly-rated Brigadier General Thao Ly, who for the time retained the additional post of MR 3 chief of staff for irregular forces. Headquartered at Seno, the division, like its northern counterpart, was divided into three: 21st Brigade at Thakhek, 22nd Brigade at Seno, and 23rd Brigade at Pakse. For its complement of three battalions, 21st Brigade got a trio of existing infantry battalions based at Thakhek; 22nd Brigade was given the three independent parachute battalions at Seno; and 23rd Brigade, its headquarters relocated to Seno for the time being, was given MR 4's BIs 4, 9, and 20.

DepChief Moves to Udorn

As the FAR strike divisions were taking shape, key changes were taking place in US military support to Laos. From that point forward, the DepChief was now to be sole fiscal manager for military and paramilitary programs in Laos. Suddenly thrown into the limelight, the long-shunned DepChief in December 1971 shifted its headquarters from Bangkok to Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base. From there, the DepChief began making regular fact-finding forays into Laos.

As these changes were taking effect, the 1st Strike Division was gearing up for its first brigade-size operation. With the two-battalion FAN garrison at Sala Phou Khoun coming under heavy pressure at year's end, 11th Brigade, consisting of BC 205, BI 6, and BI 12, was choppered to the road junction as reinforcements. Offering only a lacklustre defence, the brigade was overrun on 21 January 1972 and shipped down to the CATC for retraining.

Against this disappointing start, the US in early 1972 looked to upgrade its assistance again to the Lao armed forces. That February, DepChief command was handed to Brigadier General John Vessey, the highest-ranking officer yet to hold the slot. With Vessey's added clout, DepChief assumed control over the hundreds of Project 404 augmentees that had previously answered to the army or air attaché. The latter two offices gradually reverted to their normal attaché functions of diplomatic representation and overt intelligence collection.

Coincident with Vessey's arrival at Udorn, the pressure to improve the combat capability of the Royalist and Neutralist armed forces was greater than ever. Seeking significant gains before the onset of the 1972 dry season, DepChief and the army attaché proposed retraining and reequipping 18 of the 69 existing RLG regular battalions. The FAR General Staff agreed to this in principle.

In preparation for this retraining surge, the airborne base at Seno in MR 3 and a dormant paramilitary training centre near Wat Phu in MR 4 were rehabilitated. These, along with the CATC at Phou Khao Khouai and a new regional training base to open eight kilometres southwest of Luang Prabang, together were to begin training nine battalions starting no later than 15 June; eight weeks later, a second cycle would commence. All instruction was to be completed by 15 October. The training cadre was to be drawn from among the 100 FAR lieutenants and captains recently returned from training in the United States; assisting them would be four officers and eight NCOs detailed from Project 404.

Just as training was to begin, the FAR leadership began to waffle. First, problems arose over which 18 battalions could participate in training. It was ultimately agreed to dedicate half the slots to battalions from the two divisions; the rest were to be allotted to FAN formations and FAR volunteer battalions. Second, plans for the Luang Prabang training centre were shelved after the MR 1 commander proved uncooperative.

The 15 June 1972 start date, as a result, slipped by a week. This delay, however, proved fortunate for the DepChief, who in an effort to further enhance US influence over the retraining program, used the time to secure from Thailand a US Army Special Forces contingent to provide additional on-site assistance at Phou Khao Khouai, Seno, and Wat Phu. That contingent – named Field Training Team-1 (FTT-1) – was drawn from the Lopburi-based US Army Special Forces Thailand (USASFT, prior to April known as the 46th Special Forces Company). The composition of FTT-1 included an Udorn-based rear headquarters and two 12-man A Detachments, both of which were set to go into Laos by day and return to Thailand by night.

By that late hour, however, the USASFT, being stretched thin with a multitude of assignments, had available only one spare A Detachment under the command of Captain Udo Walther. For the second detachment, USASFT pieced together 12 men under Captain James Bruton, including some members who had previously held staff positions.

First crossing into Laos on 23 June, six men from Bruton's ad hoc unit were grouped into Operational Detachment-1 (OD-1) and dispatched to the CATC at Phou Khao Khouai. Immediately, OD-1 was met by an initial cycle of trainees comprising FAR volunteer troops and FAN BC 208. For the next eight weeks the resident FAR instructor cadre, well versed after conducting refresher training over the previous 17 months, led the class through platoon and company manoeuvres, then a final battalion exercise east of the camp.

By late September 1972, a second cycle composed of 1st Strike Division battalions began its cycle. Upon graduation in November, Phou Khao Khouai's six-battalion quota of the 18 battalions to be retrained was met. Moreover, with Brigadier General Bounchanh preparing to launch his first division-size operation north along Route 13, the remaining 1st Strike Division units were unavailable.

Jobless, OD-1 was about to be repatriated to Thailand when DepChief conjured up a new assignment: selected units from MR 2 were rotated through Phou Khao Khouai for an anti-armour crash course. That completed, OD-1 packed its bags and left Laos by the third week of December 1972.

FTT-1's second operational detachment, OD-2, was assigned to Wat Phu (also known as PS 46). Commanded by Captain Bruton, OD-2's six men were to help remould MR 4 FAR and FAN forces into (yet again) *groupements mobiles*. Four GMs were planned: GM 4001, based at Khong Sedone and comprised of BVs 44 and 47 (both long-time residents of that town), plus BI 7; GM 4002, set to cover the eastern approaches to Pakse, composed of BVs 41 (formerly at Saravane), 43 (formerly at Attopeu), and 46 (formerly at Thateng); GM 4003, in the Champassac-Khong Island vicinity, contained BVs 42 and 48 (in Champassac Province), as well as BV 49 and BC 203 (both on Khong Island); and GM 4004, grouped the Neutralists from BI 16, BC 207, and 104 BP. Of these four GMs, only the first and last would ultimately be trained as coherent regiments at Wat Phu; the other two were given token regimental commanders and little else.

By the time OD-2 landed at Wat Phu on 25 June, 104 BP was already on site. BC 207 came the next day, followed by BI 16 three days later. As training began for the 1,189-strong GM 4004, the USSF advisors experienced considerable frustration. An entry in Bruton's diary noted that the battalion commanders often did not bother to show up, leaving the training cadre to serve in their stead.

Despite such an indifferent performance, GM 4004 on 22 August was ready for its final field training exercise. Moving south from Wat Phu, the Neutralists operated in an area frequented by four weak Pathet Lao battalions. After four days, the field exercise was successfully brought to a close. Brigadier General Soutchay presided over a graduation ceremony at Wat Phu on 30 August, after which the *groupement mobile* was deployed to the Khong Sedone front.

SPECOM commandos at Seno in early 1973. An M60 machine gun is on a pedestal mount in the centre of their M38A1 jeep. Two of the commandos wear US camouflage tropical combat uniforms; the SPECOM scorpion insignia is sewn on their tiger striped jungle hats. The M16 rifle on the left is fitted with an experimental XM-148 40mm grenade launcher. The other M16 has a 30-round magazine, a rather uncommon fitting in Laos. The neighbouring jeep has the 2nd Strike Division insignia painted on the side. (Photo courtesy Oroth Insisiengmay)

Relieved at Khong Sedone by the Neutralists, GM 4001 on 22 September moved to Wat Phu for instruction. Immediately, serious problems ensued. First, the FAR training cadre drifted from the camp at will; out of frustration, the USSF team often substituted for the absent Lao instructors.

Second, the North Vietnamese in late September renewed pressure on Khong Sedone. After GM 4004 got pummelled there through early October, GM 4001 cut short its training and rushed there to shore up the deteriorating defences.

With Wat Phu training all but coming to a halt by mid-October, the CIA requested OD-2 to provide two classes in anti-tank techniques for paramilitary units. By the time this was finished in late November, the Khong Sedone front had simmered down and GM 4001 returned to finish the last phase of its retraining cycle. An abbreviated two-day field exercise commenced on 4 December; graduation followed, and OD-2, its six-battalion quota complete, was back in Thailand within a week.

FTT-1's last operational detachment went to Seno. Unlike the split teams at Phou Khao Khouai and Wat Phu, the Seno detachment comprised a full 12 members. Also unlike the other two, this was a bona fide A Detachment, not an ad hoc arrangement. Its commander, Captain Walther, was a seasoned officer who had participated in the November 1970 Son Tay prison raid in North Vietnam. Subsequently posted to Thailand, Walther took over command of an A Detachment helping with Project 009 at Pranburi. Relieved of that mission in May 1972, Walther's detachment, now called OD-3, was directed by DepChief to help retrain the 2nd Strike Division.

Arriving at Seno, OD-3 joined a FAR cadre and began instruction for the 21st Brigade in late June. In the midst of this first cycle, Brigadier General Thao Ly, ever the paratrooper, suggested setting up a commando group directly responsive to his divisional headquarters. Although DepChief refused to authorise funding for any new units beyond the nine existing FAR battalions slated for the 2nd Strike Division, the general forged ahead. Put in charge of creating the new formation was Captain Oroth Insisiengmay, a Bragg and Benning graduate who had earlier been on the CATC training staff. Assisting Oroth was Lieutenant Khammouang Santy, one of three FAR students who had recently completed jungle warfare, weapons, and commando courses in Australia.

Together, Oroth and Khammouang solicited volunteers. The 21st Brigade donated a full company – of its worst troops. Building on this dubious foundation, a set of M60 machine guns was obtained from CIA irregular troops in trade; LAW rockets were siphoned off from Phou Khao Khouai. In addition, a sympathetic DepChief ultimately diverted jungle boots, rucksacks, and some early-model XM148 grenade launchers fixed under M16 rifles. Thao Ly even donated to the group a pair of jeeps, which were emblazoned with divisional insignia and outfitted with M60 machine guns mounted Rat Patrol-style on the back.

As of early December, Thao Ly's spirited commandos, who had taken the name SPECOM (short for Special Commando), had grown to nearly a battalion. Oroth held overall SPECOM command; Khammouang took charge of its Headquarters Company. The remaining troops, organised into two Reconnaissance Companies, were subdivided into 12-man teams.

By that late hour in 1972, OD-3 finished training its quota of six battalions and returned to Thailand. FTT-1 was subsequently disbanded. For the Royal Lao Armed Forces, the time when it alone would face its communist opposition was fast approaching.

Parting Shots

During late 1972 and early 1973, the CIA's irregular forces in Laos fought some of their final pitched battles against the North Vietnamese. During several of these instances, FAR and FAN eked out a supporting role.

During the third week of October 1972, for example, FAR launched Operation Tulah (Lao for 'October'), an air-assault by the entire 12th and 13th Brigades – six battalions in all – from Vang Vieng to two landing zones 13 kilometres southwest of Moung Soui. From there, the Tulah task force divided, one part moving south towards communist-held Xieng Dat, the rest slowly moving along Route 7 back towards Sala Phou Khoun. Handing in an unimpressive performance at Xieng Dat, by 25 October the Tulah task force ceased further efforts to clear that vicinity and was subsequently lifted to Sala Phou Khoun.

Perhaps tasting blood in the water, on the last day of 1972 four Pathet Lao battalions pushed west along Route 7 and began pressuring the 1st Strike Division elements posted to the hills around the Sala Phou Khoun road junction. Dropping their equipment, the FAR troops fled south along Route 13.

To reopen the road link with Luang Prabang, the FAR General Staff within days finalised plans for a double-pronged sweep of Route 13. Named Maharat II, the operation called for the 11th Brigade to be lifted north of Sala Phou Khoun, while five MR 5 battalions – BVs 53, 54, 55, and 58, plus FAN's BV 25 – would manoeuvre out of Vang Vieng for a linkup.

Joining the southern task force, too, were a pair of M24 tanks, three towed 155mm howitzers, elements of the 12th and 13th Brigades, and six Project 404 advisors assigned for the duration of the operation.

Once the Maharat II columns were given the order to advance, the northern task force barely moved from its starting blocks. The southern battalions, by contrast, made early headway; by 6 January 1973, they were 12 kilometres short of Sala Phou Khoun. Later that day, however, the BV 53 commander, Colonel Khamphet Phamvilay, was killed by heavy-weapons fire. The southern troops immediately reversed direction; by 8 January, they had filtered back to the vicinity of Moung Kassy.

To reinforce the frontline at Moung Kassy, CIA-sponsored Thai troops were solicited for help. Between 9 and 10 January, three Thai battalions were dispatched to defensive positions along Route 13, five kilometres northeast of the town. Two mornings after their arrival, the Pathet Lao approached in two PT-76 tanks. This led to a long-distance cannon duel with the two FAR M24 tanks. When the two communist tanks reversed direction, Thai troops disabled both with LAW rockets and M79 grenade launchers.

Although the attack on Moung Kassy had been repulsed, Maharat II's southern FAR column refused to resume the operation. The northern column was also dragging its feet. At that point, a CIA guerrilla regiment on loan from MR 3 swooped in by helicopter and secured the road junction.

In MR 3, meanwhile, North Vietnamese troops in November 1972 began probing the Mekong town of Thakhek. Initially, FAR attempted to take on the approaching communist columns by itself. In addition to the Thakhek-based 21st Brigade, a battalion from 23rd Brigade and two 12-man SPECOM reconnaissance teams were rushed north from Savannakhet as reinforcements. These units, however, quickly proved unable to check the Vietnamese advance. As had happened so often in the past, the CIA's Savannakhet Unit got an emergency request for help. On 17 November, two of their irregular battalions were rushed to Thakhek to successfully beat back the North Vietnamese.

Down in MR 4, major combat had continued through the second half of 1972. The Khong Sedone sector, in particular, was heavily contested. Through August, it had been adequately defended by a mix of CIA irregulars, the FAR's 23rd Brigade, and FAN elements. By mid-September, however, communist mortars and rockets began to hit it with increased frequency. As the 23rd Brigade rotated back to Seno (where the French military mission began giving them airborne training), the FAR dispatched GM 4002 as reinforcement. Holding for another month, the RLG defenders fled on 20 October upon fears of an impending communist assault.

With Khong Sedone back in North Vietnamese hands, Vientiane pressed for its fast recovery. Since the US Embassy was calling loudly for the FAR to take a more prominent role in the kingdom's defence, the FAR General Staff opted to make the Khong Sedone recapture a showcase for its forces. Named to head the operation was none other than General Kouprasith, in his first field assignment since the 1964 Triangle campaign. At his disposal was GM 4004, elements of the airborne 22nd Brigade, and a company from the MR 5 Commandos. Directing this ensemble from the safety of Pakse, Kouprasith had Khong Sedone back in the RLG fold within three weeks, with little opposition being encountered.

Brigadier General Thao Ly addresses villagers in MR 3, 1973. He has had ERDL leaf camouflage fabric tailored to the French TAP Model 1947/52 design. On the right is Captain Oroth Insisiengmay, the SPECOM commander. A Fort Benning and Bragg graduate, Oroth wears US Army wings and US qualification tabs on his left shoulder. The SPECOM scorpion insignia is on his left pocket. (Photo courtesy Oroth Insisiengmay)

Fast forward to February 1973, and a ceasefire agreement between the RLG and Pathet Lao fixed the lines of control between communist and non-communist sectors. With this ceasefire in place, and negotiations underway to form yet another coalition, the US government began phasing out its expansive military support network. Playing a lead role in this effort was Major General Richard Trefry, who, after replacing Brigadier General Vessey as DepChief in early February, ventured across the Mekong within days after the ceasefire to assume the newly created slot of defence attaché. As such, Trefry now had control over the army and air attachés, as well as all Project 404 augmentees.

From the start, Trefry's mission was twofold: to continuously reduce the size of the US military advisory presence in Laos, while at the same time speeding the FAR, FAN, and RLAF toward self-sufficiency. In the 43,000-man FAR, challenges to this goal abounded. At the time of the ceasefire, for example, there were 16 different battalion tables of organization and equipment (TOEs) in the FAR, frustrating attempts at standardisation. In addition, the two strike divisions were running into problems because MR commanders were unwilling to assist such units not under their direct control.

Too, the RLG's ADC militia – 6,000 of whom were still carried in the order of battle – had been ignored for years and were hardly an effective force. Finally, the 5,500-man FAN was suffering from exceedingly low morale.

In the face of such problems, Trefry was under pressure to effect fast improvement. To better channel assistance to the RLG military, he assumed operational control of the RO on 18 April, thereby putting all US military resources under single management. Following this merger, Project 404 and the RO together began standardising all FAR battalions to a more modest 350-man TOE.

There was an even bigger problem facing Trefry. Up until that point, there was no denying that the CIA-supported irregular troops were far more competent than FAR or FAN. But with the Pathet Lao on the verge of being brought back into a coalition government, the communists were insisting that all irregular formations had to be abolished. For the US, this presented a dilemma: how could the more effective irregulars be preserved for the defence of the RLG?

The answer was to use sleight of hand. On paper, all of the CIA's formations were redesignated as regiments and squeezed into two strike divisions, each comprised of three enormous brigades. These perfectly mirrored the two FAR strike divisions and six subordinate brigades in nomenclature, meaning that there were now four strike divisions (two comprised of ex-CIA troops, two consisting of FAR troops). When the time came, went the plan, the two ex-CIA strike divisions would move to the forefront and seamlessly take the place of the two FAR strike divisions, with the latter presumably disbanded. Thus, Brigadier General Bounchanh would lose his command and be replaced as head of a new (ex-CIA) 1st Strike Division led by Vang Pao; Brigadier General Thao Ly, who had a long history with the CIA's irregulars, would continue as commander of the new (ex-CIA) 2nd Strike Division.

Before any of this could happen, it was recognised that Vang Pao's irregular army was ragged following heavy combat over the previous years. As a result, his men were set to rotate through five weeks of retraining by FAR instructors. This was to take place at Phou Khao Khouai, which in May 1973 was dedicated to refitting ex-CIA units from MR 2.

Meanwhile, on 1 August 1973 the ongoing negotiations between the RLG and Pathet Lao led to a tentative agreement for the neutralisation of the towns of Luang Prabang and Vientiane. To accomplish this, FAR and the Pathet Lao would each be allowed to station one infantry battalion and 1,000 police in Vientiane and two infantry companies and 500 police in the royal capital.

Before either town was neutralised, Brigadier General Thao Ma, the rebellious RLAF commander who had been in Thai exile since 1966, on 20 August 1973 crossed the Mekong with several loyal pilots and seized control of Wattay Airbase. Taking to the cockpits of T-28s, they began to bomb Chinaimo. At the same time, sympathetic troops took over the radio station and started to issue communiques claiming they had taken over control from Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma.

News of the unfolding coup quickly spread across the kingdom. That morning, Thao Ly received word at Seno, prompting him to order his SPECOM commander, Major Oroth Insisiengmay, to ready his commandos for deployment to Vientiane within three hours. With one SPECOM platoon already in the capital for VIP protection, Oroth laid plans for the remainder of his men to deploy to Paksane, then be heliborne into the paddies near Phone Kheng. Before Thao Ly issued clearance to proceed, however, an armour-led column from Chinaimo pushed its way into Wattay and crushed the coup attempt.

In the end, the Thao Ma coup attempt proved the last gasp of the rightists. It also spelled the premature end to the two FAR strike divisions: the headquarters for both divisions and the six brigades were quietly dissolved and their subordinate battalions were returned to the control of MR commanders. For his part, Brigadier General Thao Ly was called to Vientiane in September and made the new chief of military intelligence. That same month, the long-awaited protocols to the ceasefire agreement were signed, opening the way for the Lao factions to iron out the final mechanics of a coalition government.

8

DENOUEMENT

On 12 October 1973, a pair of Aeroflot An-12 transports from North Vietnam landed at Wattay. From them stepped the first group of cadre and soldiers from the Pathet Lao 206th Public Security Battalion, the communist half of the mixed garrison authorised for Vientiane. By year's end, Soviet planes landed the rest of the battalion at the capital, while Chinese aircraft lifted a second Pathet Lao contingent from North Vietnam to Luang Prabang.

Although the writing was on the wall, a 14 February 1974 policy directive from Secretary of State Henry Kissinger ordered the US Embassy to continue providing Souvanna Phouma with effective military assistance throughout the transitionary period prior to creation of a coalition government.

With this mandate, the 172-man Defence Attaché Office (including Project 404 personnel and the DepChief support staff at Udorn) during the first quarter of 1974 worked to forge a smaller yet more self-sufficient Royal Lao Armed Forces. Total force strength – including FAR, FAN, RLAF, ADC, and former CIA troops – was to shrink from 88,000 men to 60,000 by the third quarter of 1974, with a further 10,000-man reduction one year after that.

On 4 April, all Lao factions reached agreement on the composition of a Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU). With the creation of the PGNU, foreign military personnel had 60 days to leave the kingdom. That gave Defence Attaché Trefry until 4 June to reduce his office to 30 uniformed in-country personnel – all officially accredited as diplomats – plus a 56-man support staff at Udorn.

With this deadline looming, Trefry's office realised just how hard it would be to merge the ex-CIA troops into the FAR. For one thing, the ex-CIA units would need to shift to lower FAR pay scales – a move likely to adversely affect their morale and thereby undercut the effectiveness of the RLG's most credible defenders. For another thing, as part of the substantial programmed reductions in the overall size of the FAR, ex-CIA units now faced drastic cuts.

In short, this meant that the earlier plan to retain two ex-CIA strike divisions was no longer feasible. Instead, a painful consolidation would need to take place. Accordingly, in MR 1 what had been nine ex-CIA irregular battalions was almost overnight slashed to just five.

In MR 2, demographic realities already had taken a major bite out of Vang Pao's irregular army. Once having counted dozens of CIA-backed irregular and FAR battalions in his region, Vang Pao was left with only enough men to fill 14. To give the general a region-wide manoeuvre force, four of the 14 battalions were regrouped into a new 2nd Brigade at Long Tieng under the command of Colonel Moua Sue.

In MR 3, similar drastic troop cuts took place. Three consolidated battalions were grouped under a new 3rd Brigade headed by Colonel Praseurth Mounsourysak, an ex-BV 31 commander from Dong Hene. Headquartered at Nong Saphong, 3rd Brigade kept one battalion at the Moung Phalane front and the other two in the Thakhek sector.

Three more consolidated battalions were integrated into a new FAR parachute unit at Seno, the 7th Airborne Brigade. Headed by Colonel Bounthavy Phousangiem, the brigade contained four parachute battalions. The first two, 711 and 712 BP, were a merger of the three existing FAR airborne battalions. The 713 BP, commanded by Major Khao Insisiengmay, consisted of ex-CIA troops. The last battalion, Oroth Insisiengmay's 714 BP, had grown from his earlier SPECOM. Beginning in the late spring of 1974, the brigade began rotating battalions through retraining at Phou Khao Khouai, a move that served the additional, unstated purpose of helping offset the Pathet Lao presence in Vientiane.

During a survey of Chinaimo military camp in late 1974, US Defense Attaché Richard Trefry photographed a pair of antiquated M8 armoured cars and a M3 half-track gathering dust. (Photo courtesy Richard Trefry)

Captain Khampeu Nobouphasavanh while serving in the 7th Airborne Brigade, 10 December 1974. He wears a P64-style Utility Shirt fashioned from French lizard camouflage cloth. Over his left breast are US jump wings and an RTA ranger badge; the latter was awarded after attending two months of irregular warfare training at Phitsanulok in 1966. (Photo courtesy Khampeu Nobouphasavanh)

In MR 4, the ex-CIA troops were consolidated and merged into a new 4th Brigade headquartered at the Route 13-23 intersection. Command went to Lieutenant Colonel Khamphat Boua, a half-French former PS 18 camp commander. Of its three battalions, two took turns rotating to MR 5 to counter the Pathet Lao presence in the capital.

Last Gasps

It would be in the remote northwest of Laos where the communists attempted their first post-PGNU advances. In late September 1974, after Souvanna Phouma departed for France to recuperate from a July heart attack, Pathet Lao patrols attacked the town of Xieng Lom. To the surprise of the communists, who expected that no counterattack would be mounted while the Prime Minister was absent, a flight of T-28s pounded them back into the jungle.

During the same month, two ex-CIA companies revolted near Ban Houei Sai after not receiving wages for three months. Marching into Ban Houei Sai, the companies confronted the town's resident BV 18. After receiving their back pay, they quietly returned to the field. Subsequent investigation showed that Pathet Lao forces had offered encouragement to the rebels.

Three months later, the same two companies again were contemplating mutiny. Their stated grievances were two: withheld pay and underrepresentation of Lao Theung tribesmen in the FAR. Unstated – and even more important – was the fact that the rebel leader, Captain Chansouk, was disgruntled after being demoted to company commander following the integration of CIA troops into the FAR.

In response to the insurrection, the FAR General Staff ordered a flight of T-28s from Long Tieng to buzz the town. In addition, the 7th Airborne Brigade at Seno began preparing an assault force. Before FAR forces were brought to bear, however, the rebellion was settled after four days of negotiations.

The muted FAR response to the incident at Ban Houei Sai served to encourage anti-rightist forces elsewhere. During the first week of January 1975, demonstrators took to the streets of Thakhek denouncing the monarchy. Colonel Bounlue Nammatou, chief of the Thakhek subdivision, ordered his men to fire on the crowd, killing one civilian and stirring the crowds into a frenzy. The paratroopers of 714 BP rushed to the town but were unable to suppress the uprising. Thus, Thakhek became the first major population centre to fall under Pathet Lao control.

Despite the loss of Thakhek, the Royal Lao Armed Forces – at least on paper – was still evenly matched against its opponents. With a total strength of 52,329 men, FAR was only slightly smaller than the estimated 57,115 communists (33,115 Pathet Lao and 24,000 North Vietnamese) under arms. FAR troops, in fact, held a strong numerical advantage in MR 5 and throughout the panhandle. In addition, FAR maintained armoured squadrons in MRs 1, 3, 4, and 5, plus an artillery battalion in each region; the communists, by contrast, had artillery and armour units concentrated only in MR 2.

Still, the communists had the advantage of choosing their targets. When they did strike next, it was the often-contested Sala Phou Khoun crossroads. Garrisoned since December 1974 by BI 212 of the Long Tieng-based 2nd Brigade, a minor probe against the intersection in February 1975 prompted Vang Pao to reinforce the site with BI 208, a 4.2-inch mortar, and a 75mm pack howitzer. It was this combined force that on 14 April faced a Pathet Lao push down Route 7 from the east. Under orders from Sisouk Na Champassac, the PGNU defence minister, to counterattack, Vang Pao ordered nine RLAF T-28s at Long Tieng to strafe and bomb the Pathet Lao column into retreat.

Though it was a tactical defeat for the communists, the probe at Sala Phou Khoun turned into a psychological victory for the Pathet Lao when Souvanna Phouma publicly berated Sisouk for authorising a counterattack. The fall of the Khmer Republic to Khmer Rouge forces on 17 April and South Vietnam's collapse 13 days later further boosted communist morale. Laos was now alone.

Thus emboldened, the Pathet Lao early in the first week of May 1975 issued instructions to increase military pressure to take advantage of the other communist victories in the region. In support, the North Vietnamese assigned three reconnaissance elements to scout the vicinities of Sala Phou Khoun, Bouamlong, and Long Tieng. They also deployed combat forces toward Sam Thong and Sala Phou Khoun. Toward this second target, in particular, the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao advanced with PT-76 tanks and artillery. At 1100 hours, 5 May, they struck the 2nd Brigade, prompting the Hmong troops to fold.

Brushing aside his earlier reprimand, Defence Minister Sisouk ordered two FAN battalions, BIs 15 and 17, to counterattack; both refused. Without opposition the tank-led communist troops pushed through Sala Phou Khoun and reached Moung Kassy, overrunning that town the following night; the FAR forward line reformed farther south at Vang Vieng.

With the Pathet Lao bearing down Route 13, the FAR leadership started throwing in the towel. On 10 May Sisouk quit, as did Brigadier General Thonglith, the MR 5 commander. Souvanna Phouma the same day recalled Vang Pao and announced that the Hmong general would be replaced as MR 2 commander by Brigadier General Monivong Kindavong, the Prime Minister's nephew and a former MR 2 deputy commander. Hearing this, Vang Pao ripped off his general's stars in disgust and threw them on Souvanna Phouma's desk.

A FAR military police officer, identifiable by the branch insignia on his collar, confers with Pathet Lao soldiers on a joint patrol in Vientiane, early 1975. (Photo courtesy Roland Neveu)

On 12 May, MR 5 commander Thonglith was fired. Named in his place was Major General Sourith, who over the years had proved as resilient as he was ineffective.

Up at Long Tieng Vang Pao was also preparing for life in exile. In a three-day airlift, thousands of Hmong – including the general and six of his wives – were flown to Thailand. At 1100 hours on 14 May, the last evacuation plane departed the Long Tieng runway, leaving behind some 14,000 refugees.

Elsewhere around the kingdom the collapse of the Royal Lao Armed Forces snowballed. On 18 May, Pathet Lao began to occupy Pakse. Three days later, Brigadier General Soutchay was ordered to fly to Vientiane for a two-week indoctrination session at Chinaimo for all remaining MR commanders and FAR generals. As instructed, Soutchay ventured to Chinaimo to join his fellow generals for the seminar.

On 22 May, a Pathet Lao delegation flew by chopper to Sam Thong. Greeted by the new MR 2 commander, Brigadier General Monivong, seven Pathet Lao then took a plane to Vang Pao's long-time guerrilla headquarters at Long Tieng. Though Long Tieng had weathered punishing onslaughts during the war – and always prevailed – it could resist no more.

On 7 June the Chinaimo seminar concluded. Soutchay returned to Pakse and held a final conference with his headquarters staff and battalion commanders. Agreeing that the situation was untenable, the general flew back to Vientiane, made surreptitious contact with CIA officer Roger McCarthy, and was smuggled to the Mekong riverbank; a boat secretly rendezvoused on 13 June and carried the general to the Thai side.

Following Soutchay's escape, the remaining FAR generals were quietly removed from their posts. The last, General Bounpone, departed on 22 August for medical treatment in China. One day later, an artillery unit composed of 50 Pathet Lao female combatants entered Vientiane, symbolically declaring the town liberated. The Second Indochina War had ended, and Laos, the last domino, had fallen with a whimper.

9

AIR FORCE

Preliminary plans were formulated in May 1954 for an ANL air branch to be established with Morane-Saulnier MS.500 Criquet (French-built Fieseler Fi 156) liaison aircraft, DHC L-20 Beaver light transports, and helicopters. Nothing further was done until the eve of the 6 August ceasefire, at which point the French high command reiterated its intention of lending the ANL some MS.500s (used for artillery observation) already based in Laos.

Five months of preparation followed. Finally, on 28 January 1955 the ANL's air branch – dubbed *Aviation Laotienne* – was officially formed. For the time being, command was held by a French colonel from a headquarters in Vientiane. The following month, 10 Criquets were turned over to his charge; these, along with a French Air Force advisory contingent, were used for training the ANL's first pilots. Instruction was conducted at two locations: Wattay airport, and at an airstrip on the PDJ. Later in the year, another 22 Lao students were dispatched for courses in France and Morocco.

Despite these efforts, *Aviation Laotienne* could not handle even a fraction of the airlift requirements for Laos. This was apparent in June and July 1955, when the Pathet Lao increased pressure on Sam Neua Province. The ANL, in response, sent reinforcements to the northeast, including a parachute drop into Moung Peun. These missions were conducted by two chartered DC-3s and five C-47s, the latter of which were all flown by French crews. Two of the C-47s retained French markings, while the remaining three were given Lao roundels despite the fact that no Lao were yet qualified in twin-engine aircraft.

This 1955 airlift would prove to be the last air operation with major French participation. The reality was that, despite the French Air Force still having more than 100 instructors, administrators, and technicians with the ANL's aviation branch, the US was fast supplanting France as the prime benefactor of the Lao military. Significantly, in January 1956 the PEO delivered its first major pieces of US hardware – four C-47s – to the ANL. This was followed two months later by half a dozen Cessna L-19s.

Conversely, French influence waned. In 1957, command of *Aviation Laotienne* was turned over to Lieutenant Colonel Sourith

Brigadier General Sourith Don Sasorith in the blue RLAF service uniform, 1967. During his tenure as commander, the air force adopted this unique RLAF cap badge. RLAF members wore FAR dress whites with a white peaked cap during formal ceremonies. (Photo courtesy Paul Pettigrew)

Don Sasorith. Concurrently head of the ANL's Airborne Command, Sourith owed his twin hats to the prominent position of his family among the kingdom's political elite (including a recent prime minister). Two years later, the PEO contracted with the Manila-based ECCOIL for Filipino technicians to assist the ANL's air arm; these Filipinos soon began assuming the maintenance tasks previously handled by French advisors.

That the French were being shunted to the side was perhaps to be expected, especially since attrition had already removed their C-47s and MS.500s from the ANL's inventory. In their place were six C-47s, four L-20s, and six L-19s – all of which had been delivered by the PEO. In 1959, the PEO also delivered an Aero Commander 560 as a personal gift from President Dwight Eisenhower to the King of Laos. However, because the King's seat was too cramped, he rarely used the aircraft. (A roomier C-47 was later dedicated to the King and fitted with four leather armchairs befitting royalty.)

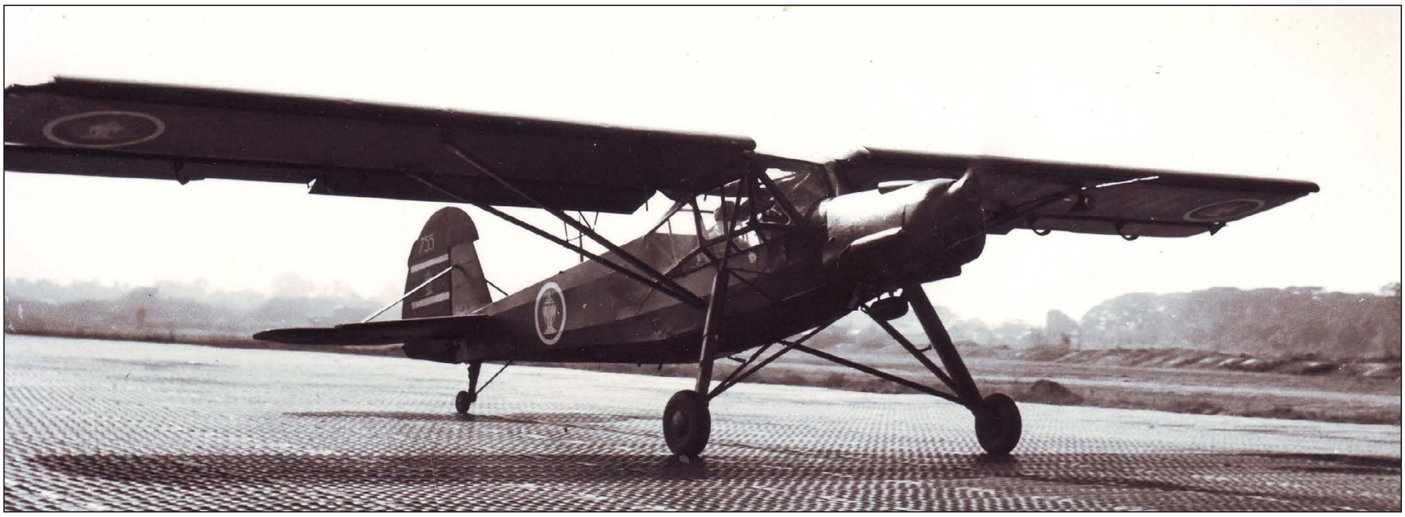
Together, these aircraft formed what the PEO was calling the Lao Army Air Force (LAAF). It was comprised of a single composite squadron with detachments in Luang Prabang, Pakse, the PDJ, Seno, and Vientiane's Wattay Airbase. As of March 1959, the LAAF had 721 persons authorised and 567 assigned (including 88 training in France). Of this total, 62 pilots were authorised and 17 assigned.

During that same year, the security situation in the countryside began to deteriorate. In May 1959, airborne reinforcements were once more dropped into the northeast by C-47s. Two months later, paratroopers were again dropped near the PDJ. While the LAAF handled the first drop, the CIA proprietary Air America performed the second operation.

The following year, 1960, Laos was turned on its head in the wake of the Kong Le coup. For the LAAF, the coup inflicted modest loses when its airframes at Wattay – amounting to two C-47s and two L-20s – were seized by Kong Le and flown by sympathetic LAAF pilots to his new base on the PDJ that December.

That Kong Le had been able to regroup relatively unscathed – and the Soviets and North Vietnamese were now openly supplying his forces – got Washington's attention. More than anything, the Eisenhower administration wanted to interdict the Soviet air bridge bringing in supplies from North Vietnam to the PDJ. One possible means of interdiction, they decided, would involve North American T-6 Texans. The T-6 had been converted into an attack aircraft by air forces in several nations, including Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. On the last day of 1960, Eisenhower approved expedited delivery of the T-6s to the LAAF, with Lao pilots to be trained in gunnery and bombing techniques at Koketiem Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB) in Lopburi, Thailand.

That same day, the US Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) informed the commander of JUSMAG Thailand that the Royal Thai



A Morane-Saulnier MS.500 Criquet (French-built Fieseler Fi 156) bearing a Lao erawan (trio of elephants) roundel taxis at Wattay, 21 January 1955. This was one week before the formal establishment of *Aviation Laotienne*. (Photo courtesy ECPA via Albert Grandolini)

French Captain Guido instructs the first increment of ANL aviation personnel at Wattay, 21 January 1955. On the underside brim of their caps they have drawn aviation wings of an unknown design. (Photo courtesy ECPA via Albert Grandolini)

Air Force (RTAF) should be offered five Cessna T-37 jet trainers in exchange for the transfer of Thai-owned T-6s back to US control; these aircraft would then be handed over to the Lao. The RTG was amenable and on 1 January 1961 informed the US that they were prepared to begin immediate gunnery training for four Lao pilot candidates at Koketiem. Moreover, in two days' time they would have available four T-6s equipped with twin gun-pods, rocket pods, and hardpoints for 100-pound bombs.

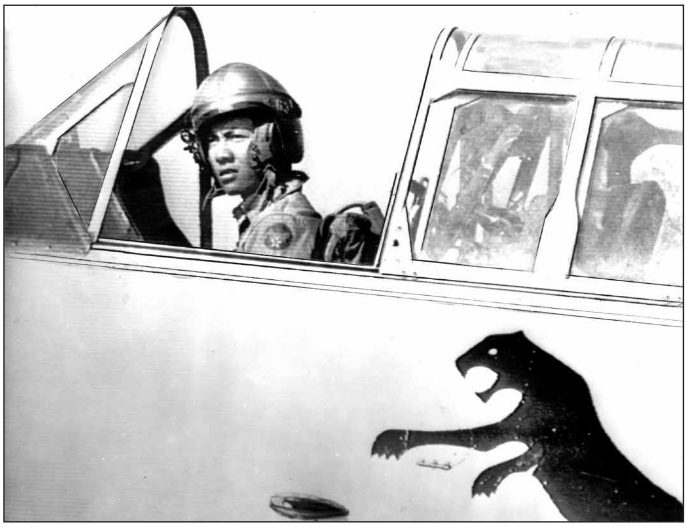
In Laos, meantime, the call went out for four pilots to attend the Koketiem training. As it turned out, three Lao aviators were already proficient, having earlier flown in the T-6 under French auspices in Morocco. Arriving at Koketiem on 3 January, they completed pro forma Thai instruction in five days. On 9 January, they took to the cockpits of the four ex-RTAF T-6s and departed for Laos to await combat.

They did not have to wait long. On 11 January, the T-6s from the newly-rechristened Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF) staged from Wattay on their first rocket run against Vang Vieng. Four days later, they struck again, posting a pair of truck kills. Two things quickly became evident. First, despite the fact that the Eisenhower administration had intended the T-6s to interdict the Soviet airlift, they were not being used in this role. Second, the RLAF lacked sufficient trained personnel to absorb more airframes. To resolve this second problem, the RLG and RTG entered into a secret agreement whereby four Thai volunteers were dropped from the roles of the RTAF and incorporated into the RLAF. By the end of the first week of February, they were flying T-6 missions in Laos.

The skies of Laos, the Thai volunteers found, were growing more dangerous by the day. Back on 17 January, the first T-6 had been shot down. A second aircraft crashed on an 11 March training run. The following day, two more aircraft – including one flown by a Thai – collided in mid-air. On 31 March, a second Thai pilot crash-landed his aircraft after being riddled by 12.7mm anti-aircraft fire; he was subsequently rescued by an Air America chopper. These losses were offset by a steady stream of airframes being supplied from the RTAF inventory, keeping the number of RLAF T-6s steady at six.

For the next year, the RLAF continued to fly T-6 combat missions despite the fact that these planes were already long overdue for retirement. Looking toward its replacement, the US Embassy arranged in June 1962 for a class of Lao students to be transitioned on the T-28 Trojan at Koketiem RTAFB. A contingent of USAF instructors were flown in for the purpose, and three spare T-28s were turned over from the South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) as trainers. By August, the class had graduated.

Prince Boun Oum exits one of the RLAF's two Sud Alouette II choppers in 1961. These were obtained from France in early 1960 by Colonel Kouprasith Abhay when he was the defence attaché in Paris. (Photo courtesy Martin Rathie Collection/Khaosan Pathet Lao Photo Archive Conservation Project)

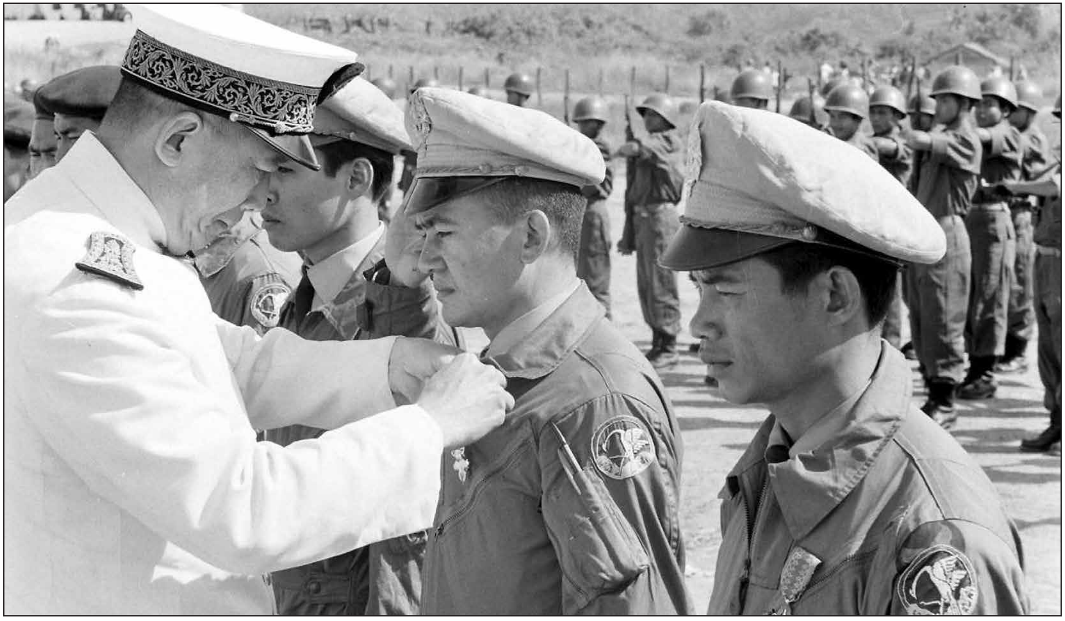


An RLAF pilot taxies in a T-6, circa 1961. Black panthers appear to have been painted on the fuselages of several of these RLAF fighter planes. The pilot is wearing a patch for the USAF Thirteenth Air Force on this flight suit; it would remain a common practice for RLAF aviators to adorn their suits with USAF insignia – especially the winged dagger of the USAF Tactical Air Command – obtained from airbases in Thailand. (Photo courtesy Albert Grandolini)

Before any T-28s could be delivered to Laos, however, international politics forced the program to be tabled. That October, in compliance with a newly-signed Geneva peace deal, there was a moratorium on offensive weapons introduced into the country. Abiding by the agreement, the US cancelled the T-28 program. In addition, the T-6 pilots on loan from the RTAF were repatriated to Thailand.

While deprived of the T-28s, the RLAF benefited in other ways. Showing its compliance with the peace deal, the Soviet Union ceased its air bridge and in December 1962 turned over a dozen in-country aircraft to Laos. Three Lisunov Li-2 (license-built DC-3) transports

Soviet instructors and FAN officers in front of a Li-2 transport handed over to the RLGAF, late 1962. Initially in a silver finish, the Li-2 were repainted in a dark olive green and given erawan roundels identical to the RLAF. (Photo courtesy Albert Grandolini)



King Sisavang Vatthana pins the Order of the Million Elephants on Major Xeuam Phimphavong and other RLAF transport pilots, circa 1963. This hand-embroidered swan insignia was used by RLAF transport crews during that timeframe. (Photo courtesy Albert Grandolini)

were earmarked for the RLAF and three others went to the Pathet Lao. The Soviets also gave three Li-2s, two An-2 Colt biplanes, and one Mi-4 helicopter to Kong Le's FAN. In a confusing move, the fledgling FAN air wing, headquartered at Wattay and commanded by Colonel Khouang Voriboun, was dubbed the 'Royal Laotian Government Air Force' (RLGAF). In effect, this meant that the Lao coalition government had two separate air forces: the RLAF and the RLGAF.

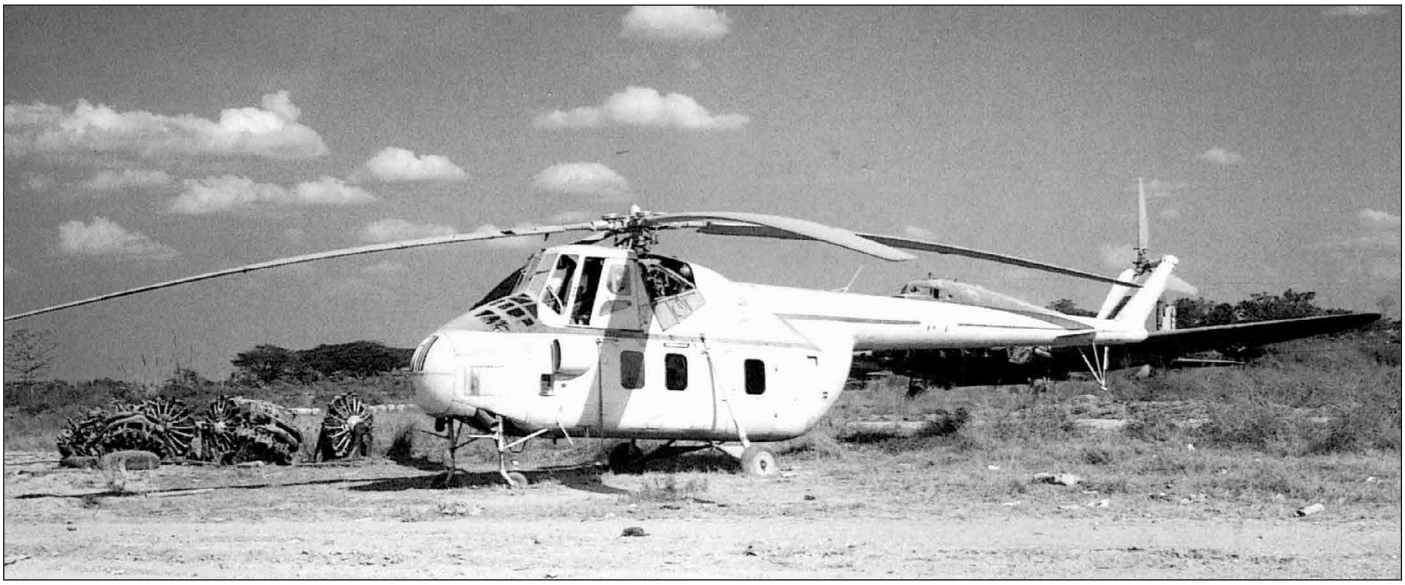
Very quickly, the peace agreement unravelled. By the spring of 1963, as the Pathet Lao made a landgrab across northeastern Laos, Kong Le's FAN edged toward an alliance with the rightist FAR. At that point, the T-28 option resurfaced. In June, the administration of President John Kennedy decided that the US would directly supply these aircraft to the RLAF; by the end of August, six T-28Bs were turned over. (Also in August, US personnel arranged for the RLAF's last remaining – and inoperative – T-6s to be airlifted to Thailand.) Each T-28 had .50-calibre guns, rocket pods, and hardpoints under the wings. A handful of bombs were also delivered to the RLAF headquarters at Savannakhet, though the US Embassy for the time refused to turn over any arming fuses.

The RLAF's new T-28 fleet saw early losses – but none due to combat. One aircraft crashed on the outskirts of Vientiane while the pilot was practicing aerobatics. A second airframe was lost in September 1963 under far more mysterious circumstances. That month, all of the new aircraft were set to participate in an air show during a military review in Savannakhet. One of the more experienced pilots was named Lieutenant Chert Saibory. A Thai national, Chert had defected from the RTAF to Wattay in late 1960 when Kong Le was still occupying the capital. When he offered his flying services to the rebel paratroop commander, he was turned down. Fearing a jail sentence if he returned to Thailand, he remained in Vientiane as the city changed hands. In a pragmatic turn, Chert offered his services to the RLG. Desperate for manpower, the RLAF commissioned him as a lieutenant and allowed him to fly the T-6.

For the next two years, Chert proved himself an able pilot. According to one US advisor, he was the most aggressive aviator in the entire force. Despite this, he never gained the full trust of the Lao and was not promoted beyond lieutenant.

Perhaps resentful, Chert decided to defect once more. Taking to the skies during the September 1963 air show, he headed into a cloudbank and disappeared. No official word was ever released about the fate of the aircraft or pilot. What Vientiane did not know at the time was that Chert steered his aircraft east and had gone to North Vietnam. Landing his T-28, he offered his services to the communist regime in Hanoi. Not knowing what to make of the wayward Thai, they placed him in prison. The aircraft remained in storage for half a year, after which it was refurbished and commissioned in the Vietnam People's Air Force.

Meanwhile, Kong Le's RLGAF had hit hard times. The Soviets had offered only a haphazard training course before handing over their planes; to compensate, a contingent of RLGAF students led by Lieutenant Colonel Sanguane departed in late 1962 for more than



An RLGAF Mi-4 and Li-2 rotting on the side of Wattay, circa 1964. Markings have been removed from the chopper's fuselage. (Photo courtesy Albert Grandolini)

FAN troops practice in front of an RLGAF An-2 Colt biplane at Moung Phanh airfield on the PDJ, 12 August 1963. An RLG roundel, identical to that used by the RLAF, can be seen on the fuselage. (Author's collection)

The RLAF student intake for Waterpump training, 1967. In the rear, second from left, is Lieutenant Ratsamy Sananikone. In August 1969, he was one of the first two RLAF officers qualified as a FAC pilot, only to perish in a U-17 accident shortly thereafter. (Photo courtesy William Ritchie)

a year of pilot training in the Soviet Union. Before they got back, however, one Li-2 had already crashed on the PDJ; the other airframes, grounded due to a lack of spare parts, were left to rot in a corner of Wattay. For all intents and purposes, the RLGAF was no more.

As for the RLAF, their remaining four T-28s saw infrequent action. But with Pathet Lao pressure on the FAN steadily escalating, Washington in early 1964 was eager for the T-28s to answer the communist provocations. Preventing this, however, was a perceived lack of flying skills among the RLAF aviators. Accordingly, the US in February began organising a special USAF detachment to train RLAF fighter pilots from bases in Thailand. Codenamed Waterpump, the 38-man group, commanded by Major Barney Cochran, headed to Udorn RTAFB at month's end. Outfitted with four T-28Ds, Waterpump was declared ready to accept its first RLAF students by the beginning of March.

Before the RLAF got around to sending any candidates, the simmering conflict in Laos erupted into a full-blown war. On 13 May, fighting peaked with a Pathet Lao blitz across the PDJ. In reaction, US Ambassador Leonard Unger

US Air Attaché Robert Tyrrell with MR 2 commander Vang Pao (left) and RLAF commander Sourith Don Sasorith, 1968. (Photo courtesy Robert Tyrrell)

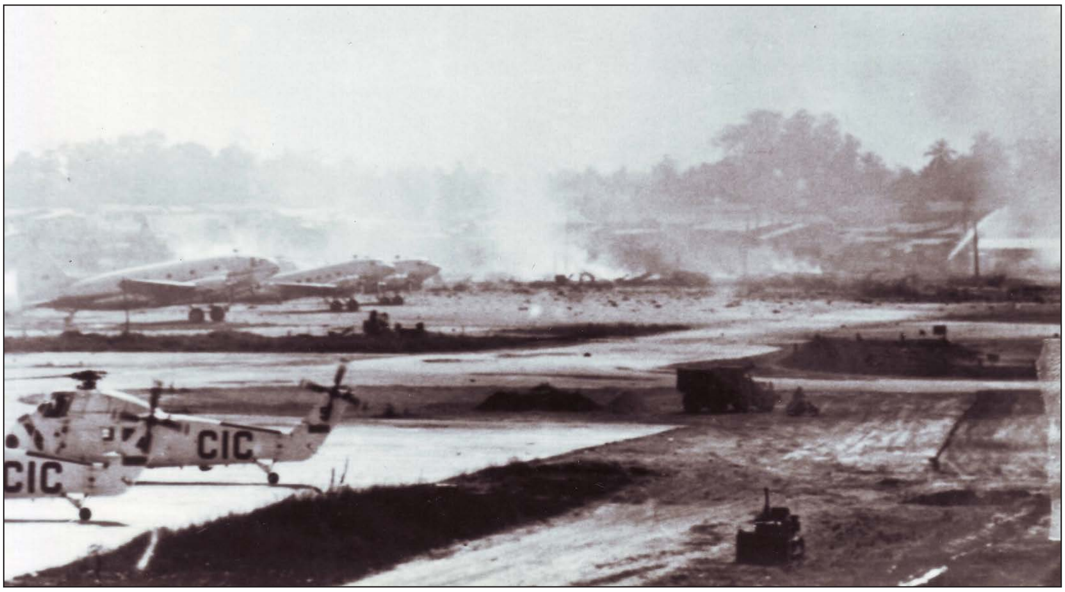
Rear Admiral Henry Miller, commander of US Navy Carrier Division Three, greets US Ambassador William Sullivan (left) and Brigadier General Thao Ma during a courtesy call to the USS *Enterprise*, 1965. During the Thao Ma era, the RLAF used the standard FAR cap badge. Ma is wearing French Air Force pilot wings on his right pocket. (Author's collection)

Draped with a belt of .50-calibre ammunition, Thai Firefly pilot Boonsong Chalomluk celebrates his 100th mission over northern Laos, 1966. Firefly pilots during that year staged out of Wattay or Moung Soui and flew without any personal identification. (Photo courtesy William Keeler)

four days later belatedly granted approval for the embassy's stockpile of fuses to be turned over to RLAF control. Several T-28s had already been shifted from Savannakhet up to Wattay, and later that morning they launched their first bombing run over the PDJ.

That same day, Ambassador Unger urged more airframes to be given to the RLAF. Washington agreed, ordering Major Cochran to turn over his four Waterpump T-28Ds to the Lao. Hastily applying Lao roundels, the aircraft were at Wattay the following afternoon, along with a dozen 500-pound bombs and five Waterpump technicians to help with loading.

While a welcome addition, the four new aircraft were not considered enough. Two days later, CINCPAC told the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) to transfer five T-28s and five recce-configured RT-28s from the VNAF to Waterpump. All 10 aircraft had become surplus that month after the VNAF phased out the T-28 in favour



Devastation at Wattay Airbase after a Firefly T-28 gun-pod accidentally set off a chain reaction, 24 January 1965. Eight parked T-28s were destroyed. The two white H-34s in the left foreground were provided by the US government and flown with French civilian crews in support of the International Control Commission. (Photo courtesy Robert Tyrrell)

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RLAF

The entrance to Savannakhet Airbase. The Lao pilot's wings over the gate are identical to USAF command pilot's wings, but with the letters 'RLAF' printed on the shield. (Photo courtesy Vic Williams via James Morrison)

of the larger Douglas A-1 Skyraider. Arriving the next day, four of the aircraft were retained by Waterpump (to replace the ones handed over to the RLAF), and the remaining six went to Laos.

Just as had happened during the earlier influx of T-6s in 1961, the RLAF suddenly had more aircraft than it had able fighter pilots. Noting this, Ambassador Unger called for US nationals – deemed more skilled and aggressive – to man some of the aircraft. After Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma approved the scheme on 17 May, Washington added its consent three days later. Immediately, six Air America pilots (later reduced to five) were sent to Udorn for T-28 certification by Waterpump. All being former fighter pilots – one with the USAF, the rest with the Marine Corps – they were declared ready later that day. On 25 May, the Air America contingent, dubbed the A-Team, was put to the test. Five aircraft took to the sky and headed toward a key bridge off the eastern edge of the PDJ. Racing over the structure, they salvoed their bombs – and missed the target entirely. Worse, when the contingent returned to Wattay, two of the aircraft were found to have bullet scars on them.

Mindful of the diplomatic embarrassment that would arise should an American-piloted T-28 be downed, Ambassador Unger was reluctant about using them again. (Over the ensuing years, Air America pilots continued to fly T-28s under special circumstances, such as search-and-rescue operations. This program was finally dropped in 1967.) Already, an alternative was in the works. Just like three years earlier, the RTAF agreed to provide a contingent of Thai volunteers. Codenamed the Firefly project, the first group of five Thai pilots arrived on 27 May at Udorn. Dropped from RTAF rosters for six months, they were certified by the Waterpump instructors by the end of the month.

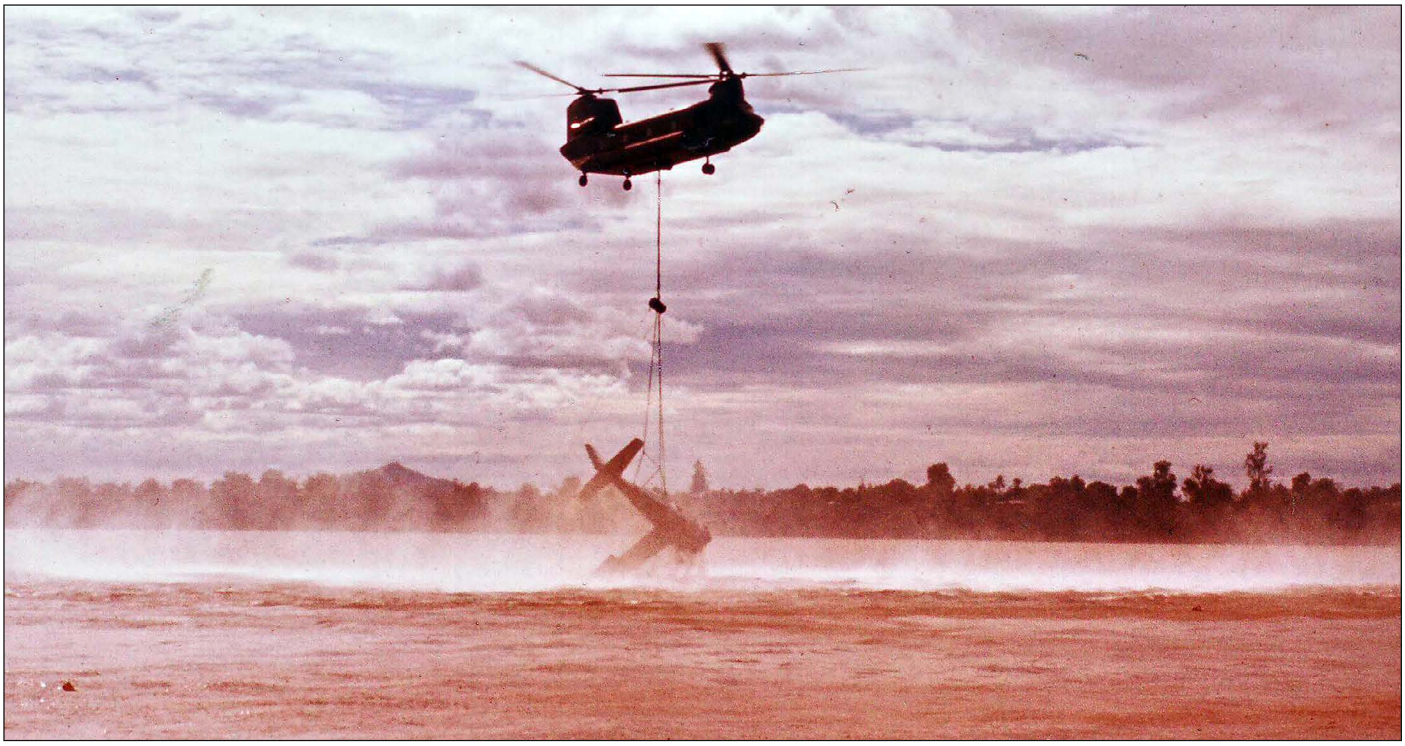
On the morning of 1 June, the five Thai Fireflies flew to Vientiane. Accompanying them were two Waterpump advisors, who established a makeshift Air Operations Center (AOC) at Wattay. Four of the five Thai boarded T-28s and departed for the PDJ. Two truck kills later, they returned from a successful baptism by fire.

From this auspicious start, the Firefly program became an important element in the RLG's arsenal. Over the next five months, both the RLAF and Fireflies flew missions over north-eastern Laos. Not until November, when the situation on the PDJ settled down somewhat, did the RLAF T-28s at Wattay return back to Savannakhet. A division of labour ensued: while the RLAF concentrated its attention in southern Laos, the Fireflies handled T-28 operations over northern battlefields. And while the RLAF ostensibly answered to a Lao chain of command, the Fireflies were controlled exclusively by the US-manned AOC at Wattay, which took its targeting orders from the US Embassy.

The next year, 1965, had a disastrous start. On 24 January, the electrical circuit on a Firefly T-28 gun-pod shorted out while on the Wattay apron. The gun began to fire, sparking an explosion that set off a chain reaction. Eight parked T-28s went up in flames.

The destroyed aircraft were soon replaced from US stocks. There was a difference, however. From that point forward, a fixed amount of T-28s were now set aside specifically for use by the Fireflies. Shuttling between Udorn and Wattay, these aircraft were not counted in the official RLAF inventory. Some of them were equipped with guide rails on the side of the fuselage which could accept removeable placards with RLAF roundels. Increasingly, however, the Thai-piloted aircraft flew without any national insignia.

The Thai needed their own aircraft because the Firefly program was fast expanding. By the spring of 1966, some 23 Thai were being contracted for six-month tours. During that period, they were each required to fly at least 100 combat sorties. With these quotas over their heads, the Thai, when compared with the RLAF, flew more missions with fewer aircraft. In March 1966, for example, the Fireflies flew an average nine aircraft a day, chalking up 289 sorties



A US Army Chinook lifts out an RLAF T-28 that had engine failure upon take-off from Savannakhet and plunged into the Mekong, 1972. Because the MRL did not have any scuba or salvage capability, a scuba-qualified US Army Special Forces team from Lopburi, Thailand, was dispatched to locate the wreck and assist with its recovery. (Photo courtesy Mike Eiland)

for the month. By comparison, the RLAF, with some 20 T-28s at their disposal, recorded just 172 missions.

Not only were the Fireflies more active, but they were more accurate. This was because they were required to use either Forward Air Control (FAC) spotter aircraft or locals in the backseat of the lead fighter in order to direct their strikes. Until the spring of 1966, the FAC aircraft were civilian planes often belonging to Air America. In October 1966, the USAF began providing O-1s for this purpose. Often bearing RLAF markings, these O-1s flew with American pilots who went by the callsign Raven. By comparison, the RLAF refused foreign FAC guidance and insisted on using grid-coordinates – usually based on outdated intelligence.

The RLAF had other problems, chief among them its flamboyant commander, Thao Ma Manosith. Of mixed Lao-Vietnamese heritage, Ma had entered the ANL during the French era. Earning a slot at the ANL Officer Candidate School, he joined the airborne battalion upon graduation. Ma remained with the paratroopers until 1957, then volunteered for the aviation branch. After checking out in the L-19 at Wattay, he was sent for T-6 training in Morocco and twin-engine instruction in France.

Returning to Laos in early 1960, Captain Ma initially flew transports. Because of his prior T-6 experience – and his loyalty to the counter-coup leaders then massing in Savannakhet – he was rewarded in January 1961 by being selected to lead the four-man group headed for T-6 gunnery instruction at Koketiem. Upon his return, the newly-promoted Major Ma was named the first commander of the RLAF.

Almost immediately, Ma became problematic. During the first week of February 1961, for example, he threatened a rebellion if the army carried out plans to move the RLAF headquarters from Wattay to Savannakhet, apparently out of concern that the air force would become too far removed from the centre of power (the headquarters did move to Savannakhet by mid-year). Later that year, after another promotion, Ma refused to cooperate with his US advisors, openly professing his wish that all foreigners – North Vietnamese as well as Americans – depart Laos.

By 1963, however, Colonel Ma had undergone a complete transformation in character and political outlook. By the time the US delivered the first T-28s that August, Ma was fiercely pro-US and a tiger in the cockpit. Promoted to brigadier general in January 1964, he led the first air strikes against the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

While proficient over the battlefield, Ma was ill-suited for the cut-throat world of Lao politics. Sympathetic to Phoumi Nosovan, his star began to fall when Phoumi lost clout in the April 1964 coup. In particular, Ma crossed swords with the ascendant General Kouprasith – who actively began to conspire against the mercurial aviator. On 3 July 1965, as Ma was leaving a party at the US air attaché's Vientiane home, the jeep in front of him exploded after hitting a mine. When Ma blamed army rivals, most US officials agreed.

Relations further deteriorated in late 1965 when the FAR General Staff ordered Ma to transfer three newly-delivered C-47s from Savannakhet to Wattay. Knowing they would be used to haul contraband, Ma refused. The generals struck back by limiting the next batch of RLAF promotions, which Ma heretofore doled out to keep the loyalty of his pilots. Ma was also curtly reminded that the RLAF was a branch of the FAR, not an independent service.

In early May 1966, the General Staff hit again – this time paying off the RLAF chief of staff to stage a mutiny with several T-28 pilots. As the internal insurrection kicked off, Ma secluded himself in Savannakhet, refusing orders from the generals to report to Vientiane. Following this rebuff, the generals loudly charged the RLAF commander with insubordination. To ease tensions, Ma was visited on 12 May by FAR commander Ouane Rathikoun and a generally sympathetic US Ambassador William Sullivan. By then, the General Staff was insisting that the RLAF move its headquarters to Vientiane and Ma turn over control to the chief of staff. Backed into a corner, Ma reluctantly agreed to cede temporary command to his disloyal chief of staff effective from 5 June. He also agreed to shift some personnel to Wattay by the end of the month.

Despite these concessions, Ma was far from finished. For five consecutive nights, he secretly plotted with several southern officers for a show of force against Vientiane. According to their scheme, Ma would stage a rebellion in Savannakhet air base on 4 June, one day before he was to relinquish command. As it was, the impatient Ma launched two days early. While one sympathetic GM reinforced the airbase in a show of support, the other conspirators remained silent. Losing momentum, the insurrection fizzled out within 48 hours.

AIR BASE
202
STOP

The entrance to the RLAF compound at Wattay, also known as Airbase 202. (Author's collection)

Following this, Vientiane was livid. The US Embassy was irritated, too. Without support, Ma agreed to divide the RLAF. Accordingly, he would be reduced to Tactical Air commander with the T-28s, while Brigadier General Sourith, the pre-1961 LAAF commander who was expected to return shortly from Command and Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, would take over as chief of a new Military Airlift Command. To further restrain Ma, Vientiane insisted that he leave his Savannakhet powerbase and temporarily go to Luang Prabang. Agreeing to this, he took a dozen T-28s and 30 of his most loyal pilots. From Luang Prabang, they began flying combat missions in MR 1, while the Fireflies began staging through an improved airstrip at Moung Soui to handle sorties over MR 2.

Despite this latest rebuke, it was not long before Ma was again plotting with his fellow southerners. Their scheme took on a new sense of urgency in early October 1966 when the General Staff announced plans to further dilute Ma's position by making him commander of a proposed Combined Operations Center – a Vientiane desk job that would deprive him of the T-28s.

Intending a forceful response to this latest announced demotion, Ma and his co-conspirators found a window of opportunity during the third week of October. During that timeframe, FAR commander Ouane was set to spend the night in Savannakhet during a southern fact-finding tour. According to Ma's plans, his cohorts would kidnap Ouane. Meantime, his loyal pilots would strike military targets around Vientiane. After that, a rebel GM would be airlifted from Savannakhet to the capital.

At dawn on 21 October, Ma began his portion of the coup. Eight T-28s staged from Savannakhet toward Vientiane. At 0830 hours, they began dive-bombing the capital. Two ammunition depots were hit, as well as the MR 5 headquarters and the General Staff building. Some 36 soldiers were killed and another 25 wounded.

As the strikes were taking place, Ma took to the radio from Savannakhet and announced that the FAR commander was in custody. However, this was not true. At the last minute, the others had backed out of the coup. Alone, Ma readied a second flight of T-28s to depart for the capital. Before they could leave, Ambassador Sullivan and his British counterpart flew to Savannakhet and counselled the rebel aviator against another attack. Reluctantly, Ma, 12 pilots, and several dozen RLAF technicians boarded a dozen T-28s and a C-47 and set off for Udorn. Taken into custody by Thai officials, they were kept in prison for eight months before being granted political asylum.

Waterpump commander William Ritchie congratulates Hmong pilot Vang Toua upon T-28 graduation at Udorn RTAFB, January 1968. (Photo courtesy William Ritchie)

Back in Laos, the RLAF was never the same again. Once more appointed commander of all air assets, Brigadier General Sourith proved to be as lacklustre as ever. His headquarters was shifted to Wattay, from where his fellow generals were able to misuse RLAF transports by smuggling gold, opium, and paying passengers. On 21 March 1968, for example, an RLAF C-47 was impounded in Saigon with gold and opium; on the flight was the Wattay base commander and the Savannakhet deputy base commander. So blatant was the abuse that Ambassador Sullivan in 1968 refused to supply five more C-47s already in the pipeline for delivery.

The RLAF T-28s were having trouble, too. After the Thao Ma coup, the RLAF was ordered to disperse its fighters around the country. As part of this order, in late 1966 they established a new squadron in Luang Prabang. This proved to be an appealing target for the communists, who on 2 February 1967 launched a sneak attack onto the tarmac that destroyed six parked T-28s and two H-34 choppers. Five months later, the North Vietnamese staged a second commando strike at the same airbase, this time obliterating nine T-28s and one H-34.

The dispersal of the T-28s was part of a wider RLAF reorganisation plan. Doing away with the Tactical Air Command and Military Airlift Command from the Thao Ma era, as of January 1968 greater powers were ceded to the airbase commanders. Two airbases already had fighter squadrons – the 1st in Luang Prabang and 3rd in Savannakhet – with two more – the 2nd in Vientiane and 4th in Pakse – established during that calendar year.

Moving forward, the RLAF order of battle grew confusing. On paper, they started to interchangeably refer to their fighter squadrons as fighter wings. For example, the 3rd Fighter Squadron in Savannakhet became the 3rd Tactical Fighter Wing – even though the number of aircraft barely reached the minimum number for a squadron, let alone a wing.

Adding another layer of confusion, the RLAF assigned numerical designations to each of its airbases. Thus, Luang Prabang became Airbase 101, Wattay was Airbase 202, Savannakhet was Airbase 303, and Pakse was Airbase 404.

On top of all this, US military advisors supporting the RLAF went in their own direction. As the reality on the ground was that airbase commanders were increasing in strength, in June 1969 the US put plans in motion for the creation of four composite squadrons that would encompass all the aircraft at any given base. This was completed on paper during the second half of the year, resulting in the creation of the 101st Squadron in Luang Prabang, 102nd in Wattay (supporting both MRs 2 and 5), the 103rd in Savannakhet, and 104th in Pakse. The RLAF itself largely ignored these composite squadron designations, instead continuing with their tactical fighter wing nomenclature.

Incremental Gains

During this same timeframe, the RLAF would see growth in four new areas. First, the US in June 1968 hatched plans for the introduction of AC-47 gunships to the Lao inventory. This was motivated in large part as a means of defending against attacks like those on Luang Prabang Airbase. To help make this happen, a USAF training detachment, codenamed Combat Wombat, arrived at Udorn in February 1969 to restart C-47 training, which the Lao themselves had been trying with marginal success at Savannakhet since early 1965.

On 1 August 1969, the first class of Lao C-47 pilots, crew chiefs, mechanics, and gun mechanics graduated from Udorn. The very next month, the first three of eight excess VNAF C-47s were turned over to the RLAF, along with SUU-11A minigun kits. On 5 September, the Lao for the first time flew these from Wattay against a pre-selected target near the capital. Immediately, a wealth of problems became evident. As one US advisor remembered:

> The first three aircraft arrived in bad shape, with holes and broken instruments. We got them airborne, then found out that the Lao didn't understand the gunship concept: instead of banking the aircraft and, in effect, letting the pilot ride the bullets into the target, the gunners in the rear were trying to move the entire mounting while firing continuous bursts to sight targets. Very quickly, they burned out the guns.

When the AC-47s were shifted to Luang Prabang later that month, every minigun jammed on their first three outings.

As luck would have it, the USAF was phasing out its own AC-47s, these ones equipped with superior MXU-470 miniguns. CINCPAC therefore proposed that the eight ex-VNAF planes be swapped out for an equal number of former USAF AC-47s. This exchange began in October 1969 and was completed by January 1970. After that, improvement was soon evident. With a monthly sortie rate initially set at 30 missions per month, this had increased to 50 by early spring.

The second area of growth involved FAC aircraft. In early 1966, the RLAF had tried unsuccessfully to establish an O-1 FAC program in Savannakhet. The concept was rekindled in early 1969, with the US handing over six O-1s between January and March. Beginning that May, two Raven FACs were asked to instruct available RLAF students at Savannakhet. Three months after that, the first two students graduated. Unfortunately, one of the pair was to soon die in a U-17 crash at the Air Training Command.

Third, efforts were being made at improving the RLAF helicopter section. Helicopters had long been in the Lao inventory, the first being a pair of Sud Alouette II choppers donated by the French in 1960. These were dropped from the RLAF rolls by 1963. The following year, the US turned over a single Sikorsky H-34, for which there were three qualified Lao pilots. To train additional crews, a Marine Corps instructor team operated from Udorn RTAFB until late 1966. Beginning in 1967, they were replaced by a US Army training detachment.

While the number of H-34s slowly grew, the RLAF remained reticent about using them in combat. Much of their reluctance was due to the fact that Air America and the USAF already provided generous chopper support, removing pressure on the Lao to do it themselves. In fact, not until early 1969, after heavy coaxing from the US air attaché, did RLAF H-34s significantly contribute to an airmobile operation.

Fourth, a program was initiated to train Hmong T-28 aviators. The Hmong were a fiercely independent ethnic group favoured by the CIA as guerrilla warriors, primarily in MR 2. In an effort to boost morale, CIA officer William Lair in 1966 arranged for a handful of Hmong to receive light aircraft training in Thailand. Three small contingents had passed this course by the summer of 1967. However, when the CIA attempted to send them to T-28 training under Waterpump auspices, the FAR generals in Vientiane balked. Only after some firm US lobbying did the Lao top brass eventually give permission for two Hmong to be commissioned in the RLAF and sent to Udorn.

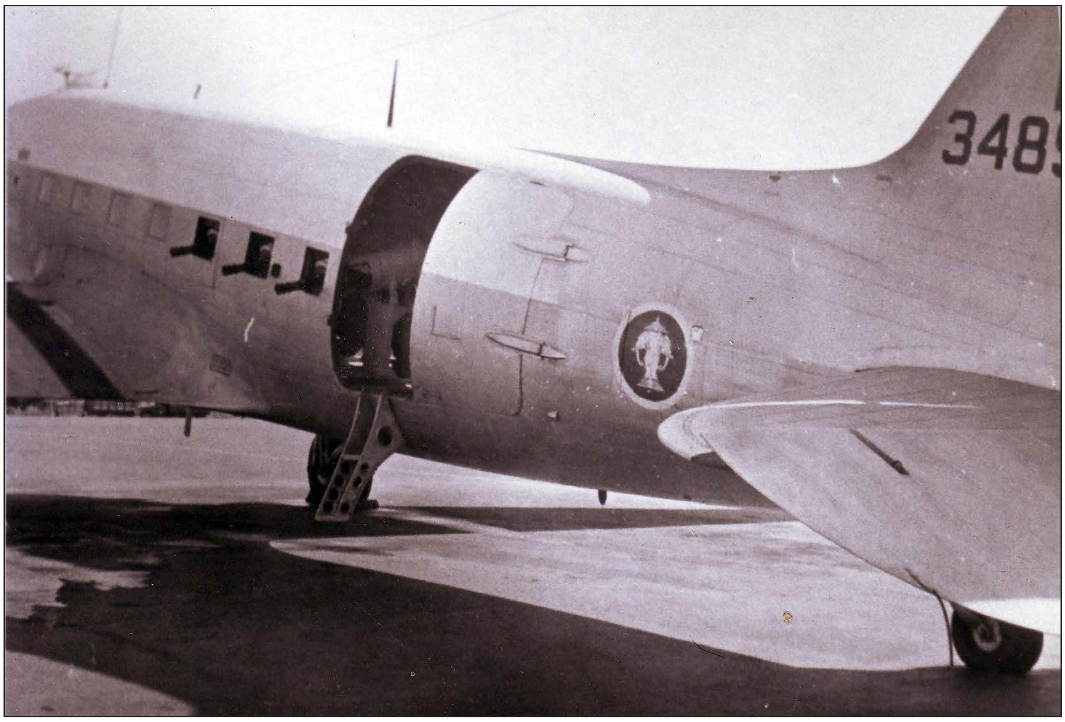
Given their earlier experience in light aircraft, the two Hmong – Lee Lue and Vang Toua – impressed their Waterpump instructors. In January 1968, both graduated near the top of their class and were soon flying missions in MR 2. Within weeks, however, Vang Toua entered a cloudbank and slammed into a mountaintop. Alone, Lee Lue quickly became a legend. Fearless in combat, he chalked up nearly 1,000 missions in 18 months, sometimes flying a dozen missions a day. This frenetic pace eventually caught up with him, as he was shot down and killed in July 1969.

Despite their deaths, the precedent set by the pair had already convinced Vientiane to accept further Hmong for Waterpump training. In June 1969, six more graduated and were posted to Long Tieng along with several ethnic Lao aviators seconded from Wattay. Unfortunately, ethnic tension began to take a toll. In September, five Lao pilots on leave at Wattay refused orders to return to Long Tieng. By year's end, the US air attaché noted with concern that T-28s at Long Tieng often remained idle due to persistent pilot shortages.

The Hmong pilot program had one other consequence. As of early 1970, there remained a pool of 20 Firefly pilots, mostly staging from Moung Soui or a new, improved strip at Moung Kassy. An eleventh increment of six junior RTAF officers was readied on 17 April, but just as they were set to begin a six-month tour, they were deemed redundant due to the growing number of Hmong pilots. That left the tenth Firefly increment to finish out its final few months. The last Thai combat sortie was flown on 4 September 1970, and the Firefly program was officially brought to a close on 5 October.

Elsewhere in the RLAF, low morale among T-28 pilots was a growing issue. 'A T-28 pilot was lucky if he lived two years', said one

T-28 contingent at Savannakhet Airbase, 1970. The wasp insignia for the 3rd Tactical Fighter Wing is on the signboard and their flight-suits. (Author's collection)



One of the excess VNAF AC-47s fitted with SUU-11A miniguns turned over to the RLAF in September 1969. Due to their poor condition, the RLAF swapped these silver and grey ex-VNAF planes for camouflaged USAF AC-47s beginning in October 1969. (Photo courtesy William Keeler)

USAF advisor. 'I never knew a T-28 pilot who lived three years if he continued to fly fighters.' Indeed, after five years of Waterpump classes, the net total of T-28 pilots had barely increased. And although T-28s had showed some sortie gains in recent years – 522 were flown in December 1968, an 18-month high and nearly triple the January figure – the increase was the result of excessive US advisory assistance.

The last point was proving to be the RLAF's undoing. In mid-1968, the USAF detachment at each AOC (five AOCs were in operation, one for each military region) increased to 10 men, putting Americans in charge of nearly all support functions and thus depriving RLAF personnel of the luxury of making mistakes from which they could learn to operate on their own. In addition, USAF spotter aircraft were performing FAC duties in all parts of the kingdom.

Such a high degree of assistance clearly could not be perpetuated, especially given Washington's declared policy of gradually withdrawing its military from Southeast Asia. Ambassador Sullivan, in particular, was eager to put in place a more responsive and efficient RLAF. As early as September 1968, he had pushed the air attaché to begin conceptualising a centralised command centre to coordinate RLG air and ground operations.

Slowly, Sullivan's idea grew. By the autumn of 1969, USAF Lieutenant Colonel William Keeler, who had recently completed work in Bangkok on a Combined Operations Center (COC), was assigned with making a similar system in Laos. The result was plans for a Lao Military Tactical Control System that would encompass five Joint Operations Centers (JOCs) at the regional level and one COC – headed by the FAR commander – in Vientiane. Significantly, the COC would be notified of all RLAF sorties before they were flown and have the power to move airlift assets from one military region to another.

By February 1970, every MR commander had given his approval to the COC scheme. The following month, an official dedication ceremony was held. The FAR commander, General Ouane, opened the proceedings: 'The COC will function as my voice and will be the vehicle with which I will communicate with all military forces in our country concerning tactical military matters …'

Despite such stated importance, the COC was physically sited at an uninspiring two-floor wooden annex outside the FAR headquarters at Phone Kheng. There, regular updates were supposed to flow in from the regional JOCs. In part, this translated into reality, with some JOCs maintaining contact some of the time. At the national level, however, the COC never expanded beyond a passive reporting facility for aircraft deployment.

Reaching its Peak

Heading into the 1970s, the RLAF had the same confused structure as before. In Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, and Vientiane, the airbase commanders and wing commanders were close in rank, and neither wanted to subordinate himself to the other. Only in Pakse was the problem averted by having the two roles held by the same person. RLAF commander Sourith, who was promoted to major general in March 1972, showed little backbone in resolving the dilemma.

Compounding matters, by late 1972 a ceasefire was in the works that could impact military aid. With an eye on the clock, in January 1973 Air America was instructed to turn over 10 Fairchild C-123K Providers to the RLAF – with pilot and maintenance training set to begin later that spring. Preparations were also made for H-34 training to be shifted from Udorn to Savannakhet. Finally, the Ravens were finalising training for a cadre of RLAF protégés – call-signed *Nok Kataen* (Lao for 'Kingfisher') – to take over FAC responsibilities.

By the time the ceasefire went into effect on 22 February 1973, the 2,200-strong RLAF was still far from self-sufficient. Even worse, Brigadier General Thao Ma decided to reappear on the scene. Ever since he fled from Laos in 1966, Ma had been sulking in Thai exile. In March 1968, a FAR military tribunal sentenced him to death in absentia. Nine months later, he had a job offer from Continental Air Services in Saigon. The South Vietnamese government, however, refused to issue him a work permit.

From his perch in Bangkok, Ma watched as the Lao ceasefire was manipulated by the communists to their political and military advantage. By the summer of 1973, many FAR generals were in agreement and panicking. Rumours began to fly that a coup was in the air, and Ma's name started to surface with regularity.

Despite this, when Ma crossed the Mekong by boat at 0500 hours on 20 August 1973, he achieved total surprise. Accompanied by 60 followers, including six pilots, he seized Wattay without difficulty. After that, Ma and his six pilots boarded T-28s and took to the sky. Fulfilling a personal vendetta against key officers on the General Staff – especially Kouprasith – he dive-bombed the MR 5 headquarters.

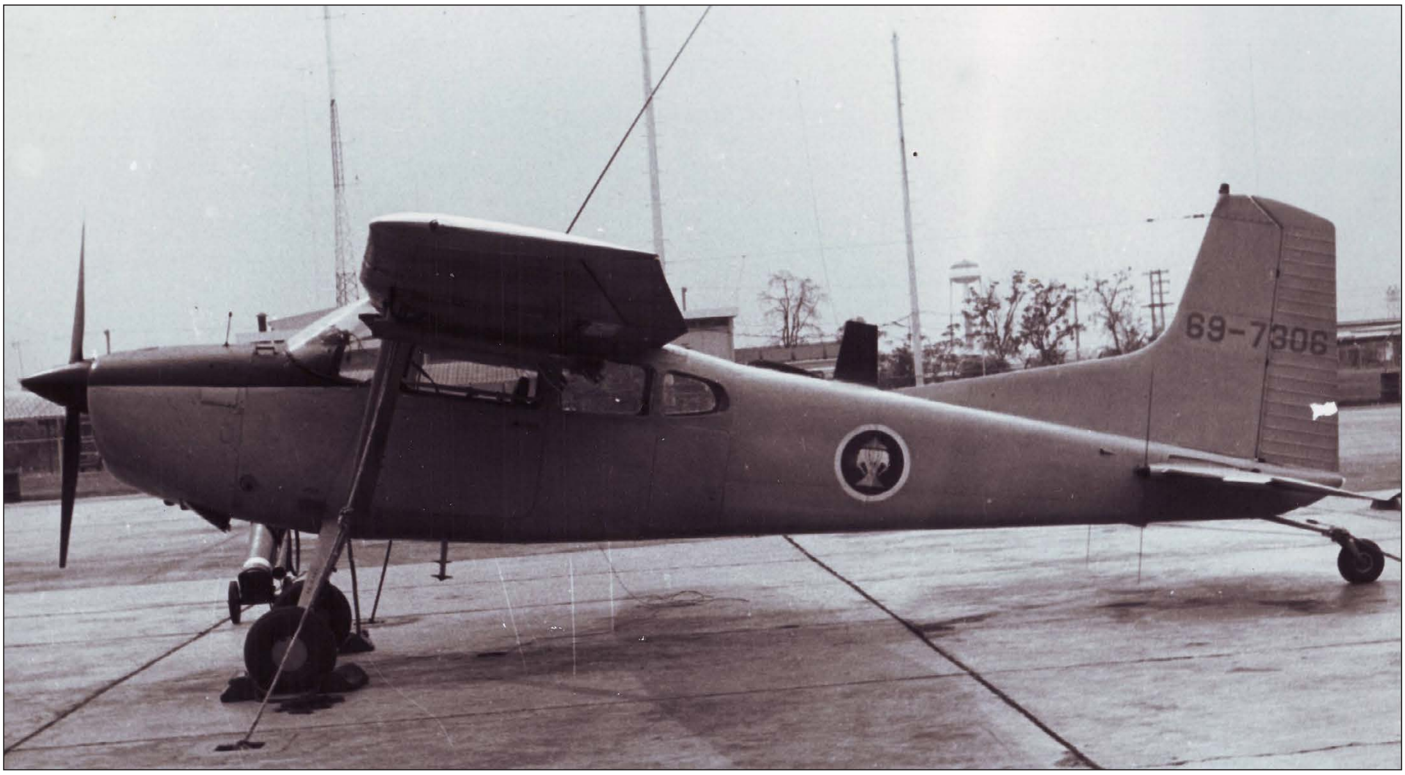
Fighting back, Chinaimo sent an armour column toward Wattay. For a time, confusion reigned. To help defuse the situation, the US air attaché drove to the house of the RLAF commander, Major General Sourith. There he found Sourith with a rebel armband, apparently trying to hedge his bets. Despite pleas from the attaché, the general insisted on remaining at home.

Back at Wattay, a truck-mounted machine gun managed to hit Ma's T-28. Streaming smoke, it pancaked on the runway. Ma was dragged alive from the wreck and loaded into the back of a truck. He was summarily executed at the MR 5 headquarters later that morning in the presence of Kouprasith. With the demise of Ma, the coup attempt soon collapsed.

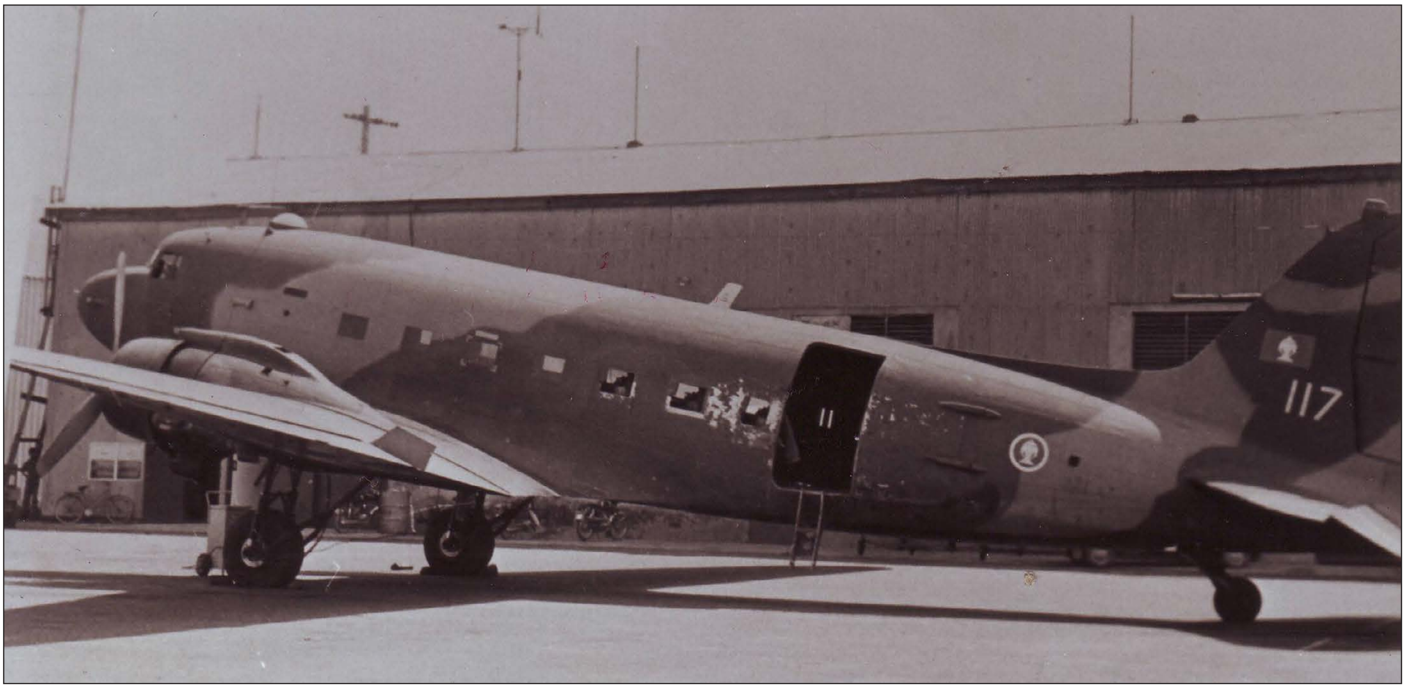
Even before this took place, plans were under way to significantly downsize the RLAF. This was due to two reasons. First, the US government was looking to slash funding for the Lao military. Second, the ceasefire had theoretically brought peace to Laos, negating the need for a large air force.

In line with this reasoning, the US Embassy in March 1973 had drawn up plans for a reduction in the number of RLAF aircraft and a lowered overall sortie rate of no more than 2,000 flights per month. Accordingly, the T-28 fleet, which numbered 56 at the time of the

RLAF C-123 at Long Tieng following the ceasefire, 1973. In the rear is Skyline Two Ridge. (Photo courtesy Veera Star)



An RLAF U-17, used primarily for pilot training at the Air Training Command in Savannakhet. (Photo courtesy Tom Lum)



One of the last six AC-47s in the RLAF inventory, photographed in 1974 with its MXU-470 miniguns removed. (Photo courtesy Robert Taylor)

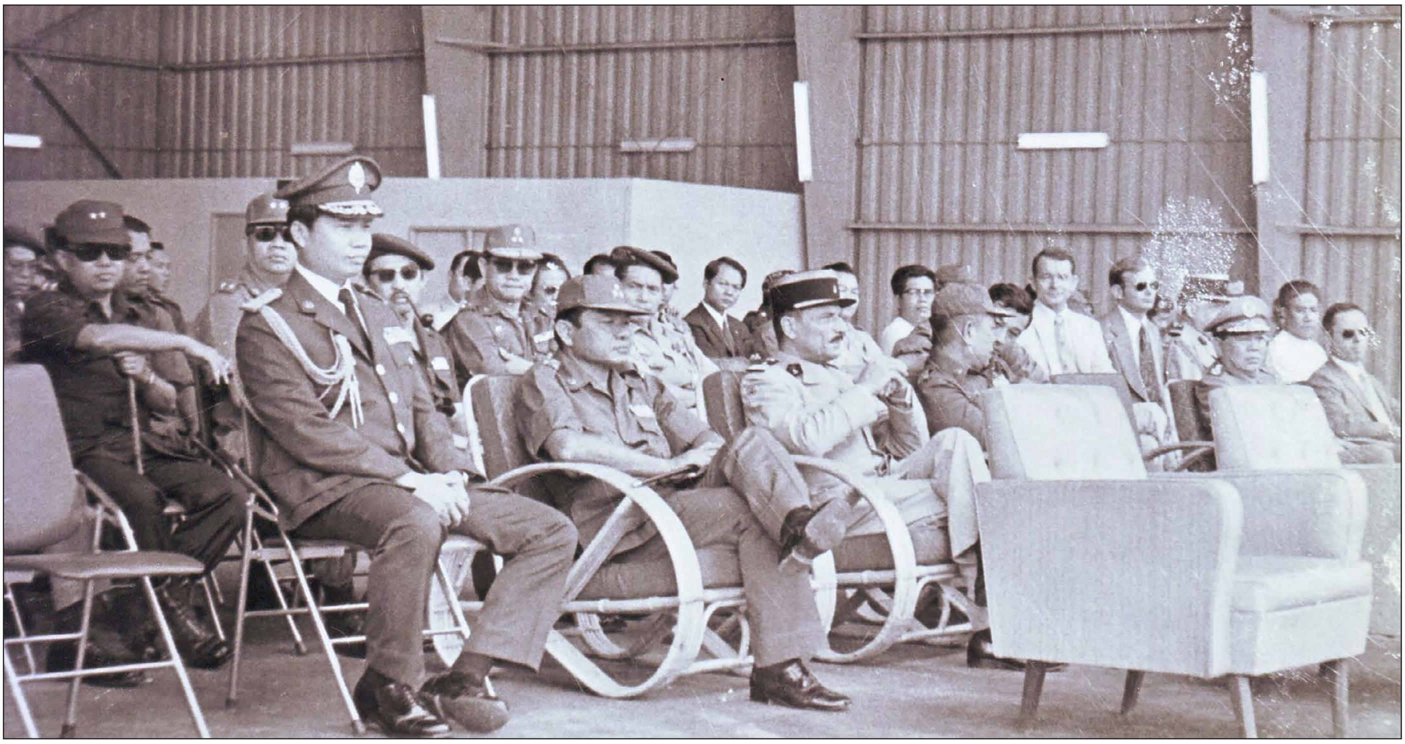
ceasefire, was to be reduced to 40, with the extra aircraft given to the Philippines.

Meanwhile, the AC-47s were reduced from eight down to six aircraft, with the miniguns removed and placed in storage in Savannakhet.

To lower training costs, all undergraduate pilot training had shifted by 1 April 1973 from Udorn to the Air Training Command at Savannakhet. Waterpump, retained at Udorn for more advanced training, was renamed the Training and Liaison Detachment.

While smaller, the RLAF on paper remained a viable force. Rather than composite squadrons, the US had now agreed to the inflated Lao nomenclature and recognised tactical fighter wings at Luang Prabang, Wattay, Savannakhet, and Pakse, as well as a detachment at Long Tieng. Besides the reduced number of T-28s and AC-47s, the RLAF's inventory included 10 C-123s, 10 Cessna T-41 trainers, 11 C-47s (three of which were provided by Australia in October 1971 from the defunct airline Jetair), 15 O-1F FAC aircraft, and 32 H-34s. Of these, the Air Training Command was allotted six T-28s, one C-47, four H-34s, and five T-41s.

Over the course of 1974, the RLAF tried to stay relevant. That March, as part of the ceasefire arrangement leading up to a coalition government, Vientiane and Luang Prabang were declared neutral. As a result, all attack aircraft – the T-28s and AC-47s – had to leave the airbases at both locales. Accordingly, the T-28 squadron from Luang Prabang was temporarily relocated to Long Tieng. The T-28s and AC-47s (minus miniguns) from Wattay were sent to Savannakhet.



The RLAF commander, Brigadier General Bouathong Phothivongsa (front row, left), during a ceremony at Wattay, early 1975. Under his command, the RLAF reverted to once again using the standard FAR cap badge. Also visible is the FAR Chief of Operations, Brigadier General Chao Sinh Saysana (second row, wearing beret and smoking pipe) and the Director General of the Defense Ministry, Major General Oudone Sananikone (front row, second from left). (Photo courtesy Robert Taylor)

In June 1974, Major General Sourith relinquished command of the RLAF after almost eight years to become FAR deputy chief of staff for logistics. Taking his place was Brigadier General Bouathong Phothivongsa. Although he had no prior RLAF experience, Bouathong had an impressive resume. A graduate of the French War College, he had been commander of GT 402 on Khong Island and, more importantly, a driving force behind creation of the COC.

Once at the helm of the RLAF, Bouathong in September 1974 made an eleventh-hour attempt to rationalise its structure. He proposed formally naming one overall commander at each base, along with a deputy for operations (formerly known as the tactical wing commander) and a deputy for administration (formerly known as the airbase commander).

Also proposed was construction of a new airbase at Ban Keun, a village 45 kilometres north of Vientiane. The T-28s temporarily stationed at Long Tieng would then move to this locale, which was closer to Vientiane but still outside the capital's neutral zone.

Finally, after years of badgering by the RLAF, Bouathong got the US to agree to transition some Lao pilots on to jet aircraft. By late 1974, four officers completed instrument pilot certification in the T-38 trainer at Randolph Air Force Base, Texas. This was a wholly symbolic move, however, as no jets were earmarked for delivery. In fact, the RLAF lost face that September when the Soviets handed over a single Yak-40 passenger jet to the Pathet Lao.

Behind the scenes, the RLAF's already limited capabilities were eroding at a fast pace. Because of fuel rationing, Lao aviators rarely flew. By early 1975, T-28 pilots were in the air only two hours a month. Exacerbating matters was the fact that Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, sensing an eventual communist victory, kept the air force on a tight leash despite open communist violations of the peace agreement.

The Prime Minister had reason for pessimism. By the spring of 1975, most of the countryside belonged to the Pathet Lao. On 14 April, communist forces seized the key road junction of Sala Phou Khoun north of the capital. Having called the RLG's bluff for months, the Pathet Lao did so with little fear of a counterattack. This time, however, they were wrong. Without waiting to consult the Prime Minister, Defense Minister Sisouk Na Champassac ordered nine T-28s from Long Tieng to strafe and bomb the Pathet Lao column.

This proved to be the RLAF's last offensive operation. Realising the end was near, RLAF transports spent the first two weeks of May whisking passengers across the Mekong to the safety of Thailand. Then, in an effort to spare themselves as an organisation, the RLAF pledged loyalty to the Pathet Lao on 13 May. This did little to assuage the communists, however, who on 15 May sacked Bouathong. While his chief of staff, Colonel Oudone Maniboth, briefly took over, he was soon shunted to the side. By month's end, the RLAF had effectively ceased to exist.

10

RIVERINE FORCE

On 1 August 1952, the Lao River Squadron (*Escadrille Fluviale Lao*, or EFL) was established within the ANL. The headquarters was initially located at Vientiane's Wattay Airbase, with small elements stationed in Savannakhet and Pakse. EFL strength at the outset was 80 persons, including three French officers, three ANL officers, five French NCOs and 18 ANL NCOs. Most of the Lao members were immediately sent for four months of riverine training in Saigon.

Through the end of the French colonial period, the EFL was outfitted with the following vessels:

- FOM 8, an 8-metre boat made in France and first introduced to Indochina in 1949. Powered by a single 70-horsepower Renault engine, the FOM 8's steel hull and armoured belt afforded it a limited degree of protection from rifle fire. It had a crew of five and was armed with a 12.7mm machine gun on a front turret, two smaller machine guns on side swivels, and two rifle grenade launchers. Three of these boats were supplied to the EFL.
- FOM 11, an 11-metre French-made boat powered by a pair of 70-horsepower Renault engines. It had a crew of seven and featured forward and rear turrets for 12.7mm machineguns and two side-firing machine guns. Eight were given to the EFL.
- Mytho, an 8-metre, flat-bottomed wooden boat named after the Vietnamese town where it was produced. Its 60-horsepower engine was adapted from a jeep. Ten Mytho, along with six outboard canoes, were given to the EFL for light transportation duties.

The centrepiece of the EFL was the French-made Wizard-class gunboat, also known as the Privat (French for 'to deny'). A pair of these 17-metre boats had been sent to Indochina for trials in early 1953; while found to be manoeuvrable, their unprotected propellers, poor propulsion (from a 160-horsepower Gray Marine engine), and fragile fiberglass hulls were rated as severe limitations. Despite these drawbacks, in May 1953 the French drew up plans to provide eight Privat gunboats to the EFL. They were each to be armed in Saigon with a pair of .30-calibre machine guns, one .50-calibre machine gun, one 60mm mortar, and four rifle grenade launchers.

While the Privat gunboats had been allocated on paper, there remained the problem of getting them to Laos. Although the Mekong River ran through Laos down to the Mekong Delta, boat traffic was inhibited on the Lao–Cambodian border by the Khone rapids and waterfalls. Undeterred, the French military calculated that, if stripped of weapons to lighten the load, the Privats could power their way up and over the rapids during periods of heavy rainfall. The next such stretch of heavy rains usually came in mid-September.

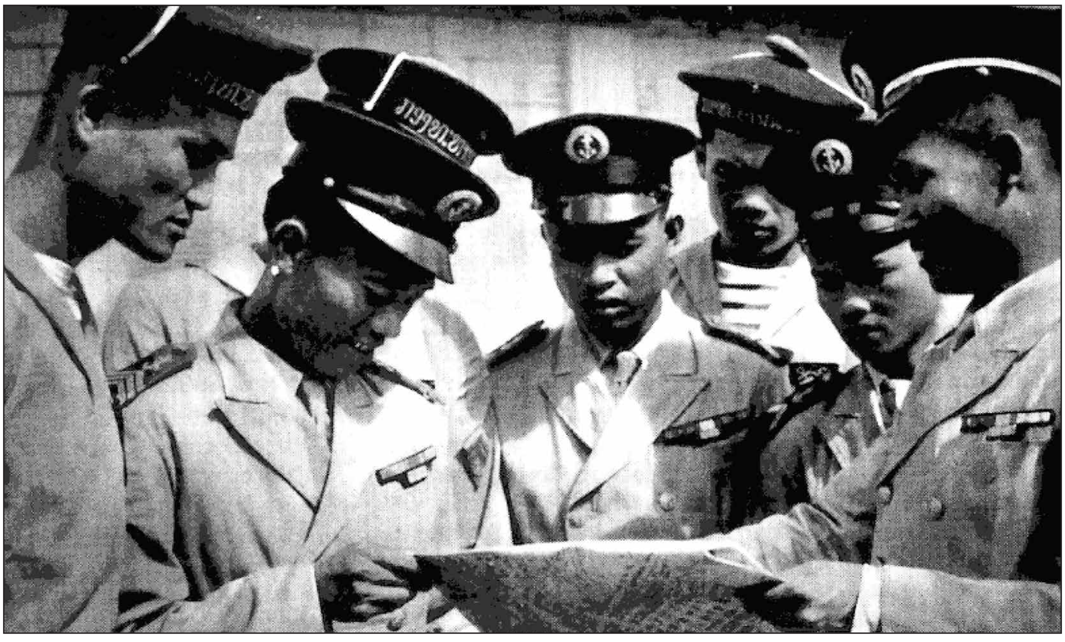
Unfortunately for the French, by the close of September 1953 the water levels around Khone were still too low. Missing that window, the Privats were used for the time being to patrol Cambodian waterways.

By early 1954, with no Privats yet on Lao soil, some cosmetic changes were made to the EFL. For one thing, in anticipation of the arrival of the Privats its name was changed to the Lao River Speedboat Squadron (*Escadrille de Vedettes Fluviales Lao*, or EVFL). Second, its small headquarters was shifted from Wattay to Chinaimo. Third, tentative plans were drawn up for a second squadron, this one to be equipped with US vessels.

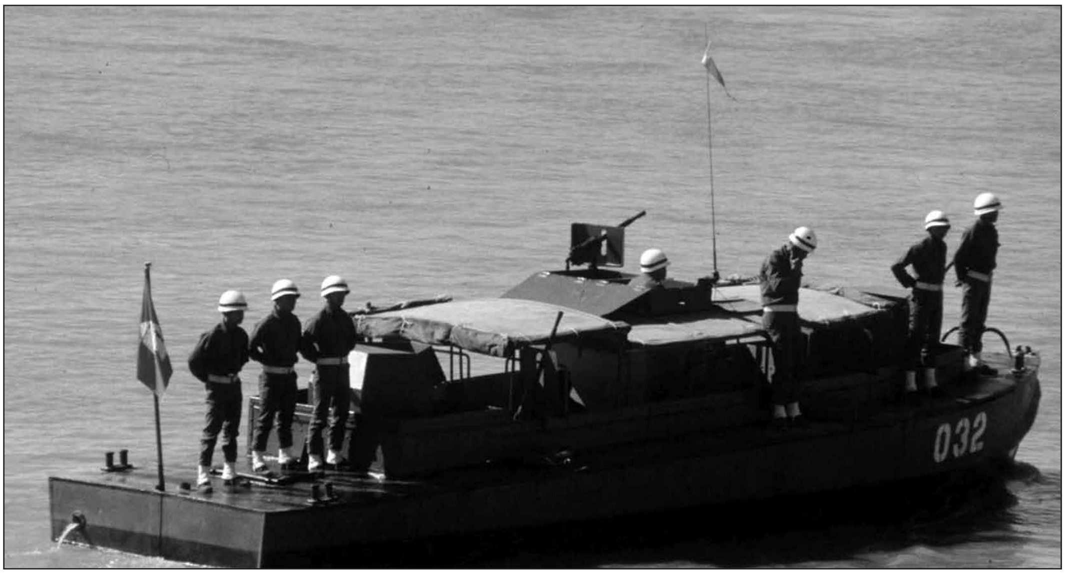
Before that last item could be realised, the French capitulated at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 and the resultant Geneva Agreement was set to limit the supply of military hardware after August. To beat that deadline, there was added urgency to get the Privats into Laos. An attempt on 20 May fell short, however, with the low water level resulting in hull damage to three vessels.

One final attempt was to be made during the first week of August 1954, with an added Privat making for a total of nine. This time the water levels were sufficiently high, and all nine vessels successfully reached Pakse on 5 August.

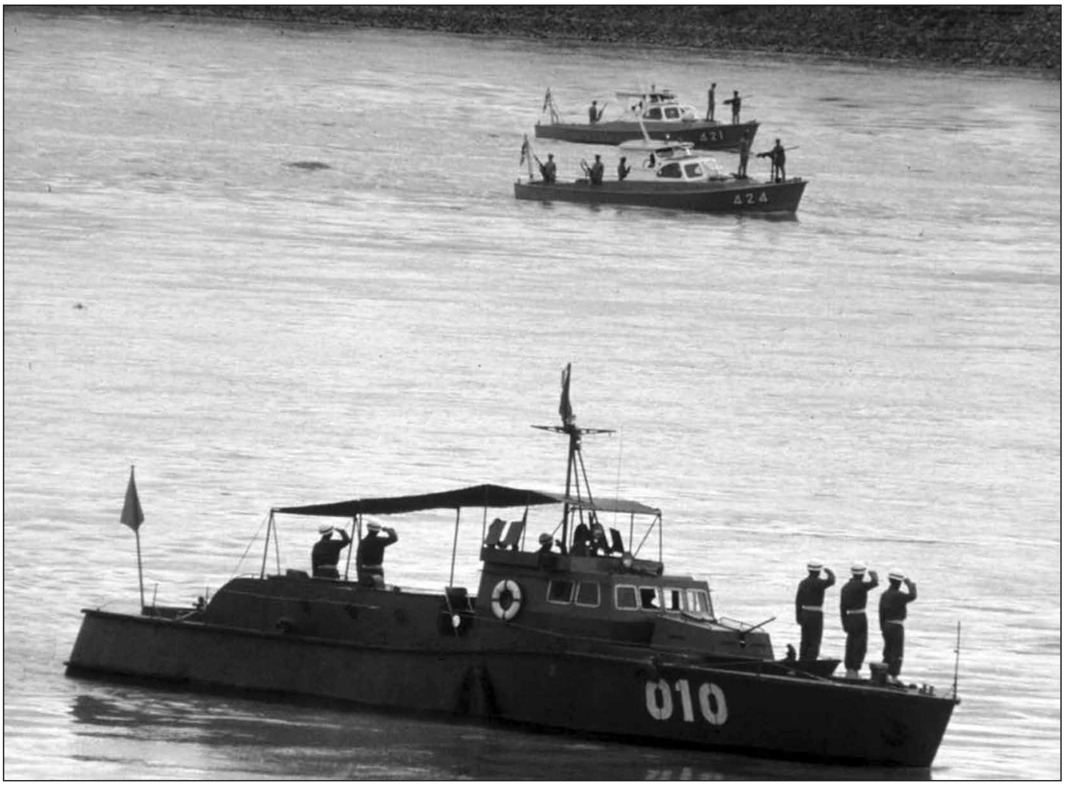
One day later, the Geneva ceasefire went into effect. With the ANL now ostensibly on its own, command of the 107-man EVFL was handed over to Captain Soulignet Chounramany. Although a trickle of French aid continued to flow during 1955 – including three more FOM 11s, four more FOM 8s, and two aging LCM-6



For a brief period in the mid-1950s, the MRL had unique uniforms including a beige double-breasted reefer jacket, blue-and-white striped shirts, French-style 'Bachi' bonnets with a ribbon reading 'MRL' in Lao around the base, French-style naval shoulder boards, and an anchor cap badge. By the time of the Kong Le coup, the MRL was using standard FAR rank insignia and its uniforms became virtually identical to what was worn by the FAR mainstream. (Photo courtesy Albert Grandolini)



On 18 December 1968, the kings of Laos and Thailand met on launches on the Mekong to inaugurate the Ubol Ratana hydroelectric project. The MRL contributed several vessels to the ceremony, including this FOM 11. It retains its rear machine gun turret; most others had the turret replaced with a platform atop of which was a recoilless rifle. A .30-calibre M1919 Browning machine gun can be seen on the rear starboard side; another has been added to a central roof mount. (Photo courtesy Albert Grandolini)



A Wizard-class Privat gunboat during the December 1968 royal ceremony on the Mekong. A .50-calibre Browning can be seen in its front turret. Laos was the only nation to be equipped with the 22-ton French-made Privat. In the distance are two Chris-Craft vessels of the Royal Thai Navy. (Photo courtesy Albert Grandolini)

landing craft – the squadron was largely inactive over the next two years because of inadequate fuel allocations.

Not until early 1957 did the flotilla's fortunes begin to look up. On 1 March, its name was officially changed to the Royal Lao Navy (*Marine Royal Lao*, or MRL). After this redesignation, command was passed to a young officer from the royal family, Lieutenant Chao Sinthanavong Kindavong. He had been in France since September 1956, first for a six-month reserve officer's course, then for three months of one-the-job training with the Flotilla du Rhin.

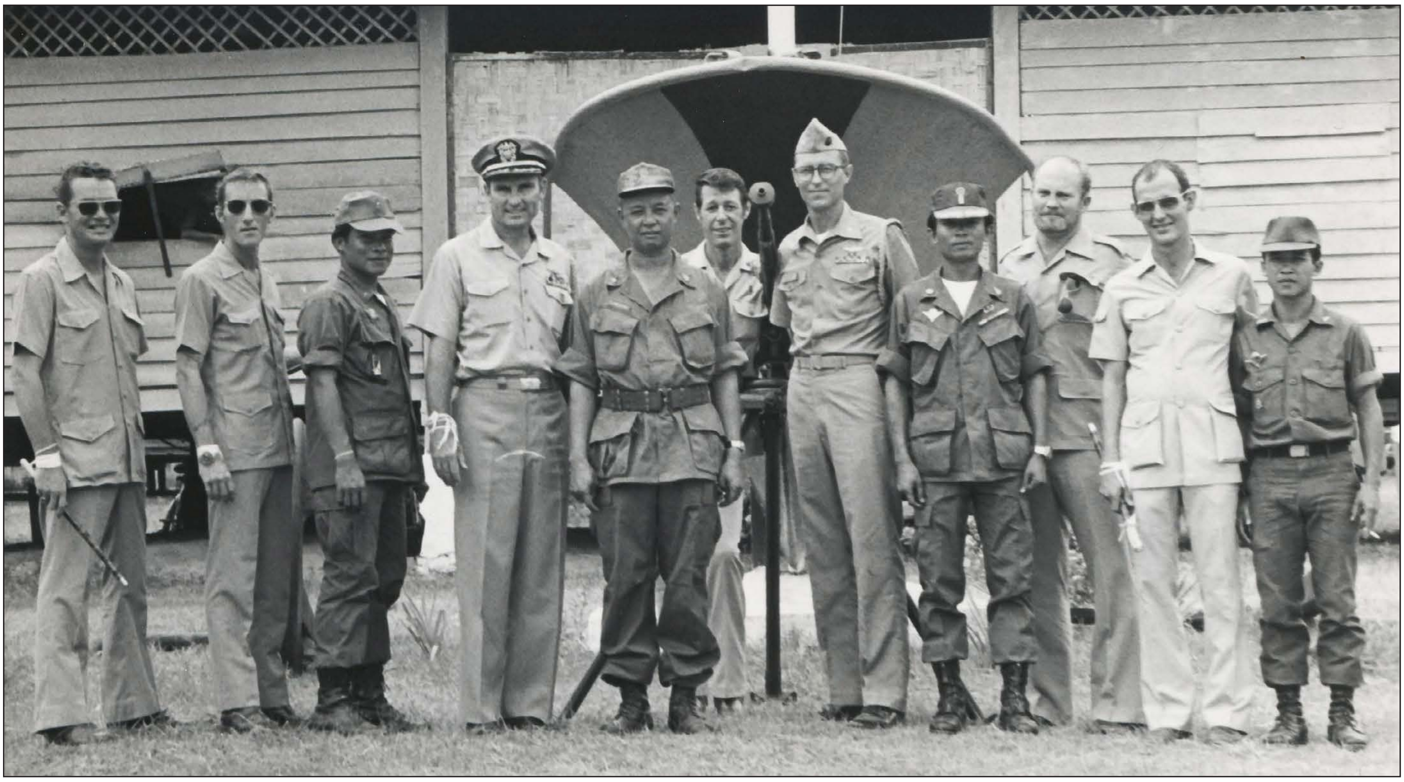
Plans were also formulated that year for the MRL to increase to 400 men, including a Transport Vessel Group (*Groupe des Batiments de Transport*). For the latter, thought was initially given to taking control of several vintage steamships once used by the French mail service. In early 1959, however, the French military mission instead earmarked funds for the construction of six wooden barge-like transports at Chinaimo. Three of them were to be 22 metres in length, the other three 12 metres in length. The former would be powered by a Gray Marine engine, the latter by a Renault outboard.

In October 1959, the MRL's first barge transport, the 22-metre *Khoun Bolom* (named after a mythicised ancestor to ancient Lao royalty), was launched. By December, the first of the 12-metre versions also went into service. The remaining four were set for construction the following calendar year.

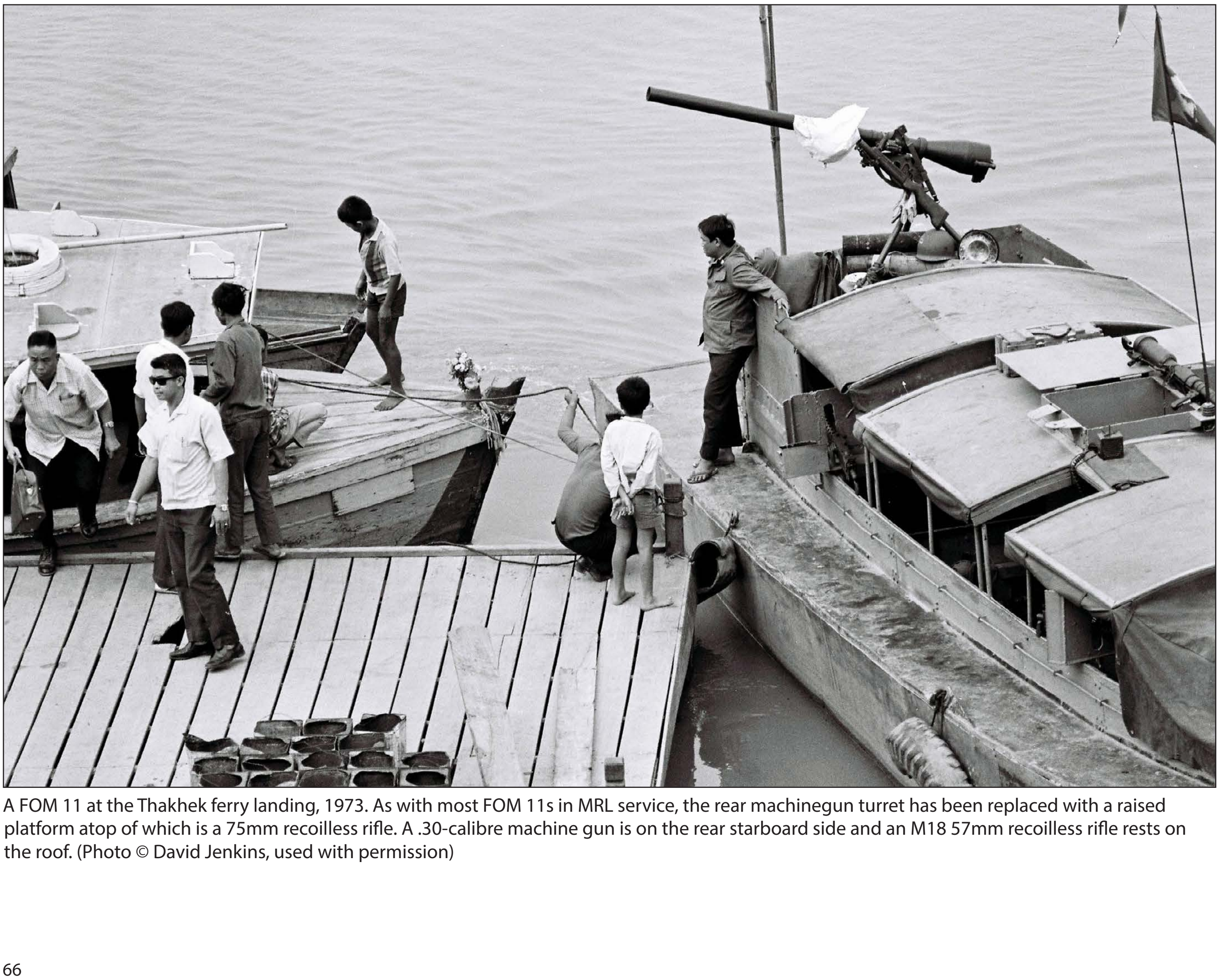
It was also during 1959 that the MRL began operations in earnest. During mid-year, four of its vessels, led by Captain Sinthanavong, sailed up the Mekong to Ban Houei Sai. It was the first time that gunboats had been to the upper Mekong since 1910. Later that year, landing craft and barges were used to move artillery pieces to Thakhek, as well as munitions to Luang Prabang. Its vessels also transported a battalion of Pathet Lao troops (which were being integrated into the FAL) from Vientiane to MR 4.

Up until that point, assistance to the MRL was dominated by the French. Every year, two or three officers and three NCOs went to France for specialist courses and on-the-job training with the Flotilla du Rhin. In 1958, however, the US looked to break that monopoly when the PEO hinted it would provide a large number of landing craft to augment the two aging LCM-6s in the MRL fleet. Like the Privats in 1954, the US planned to take them through Cambodia and over the Khone rapids.

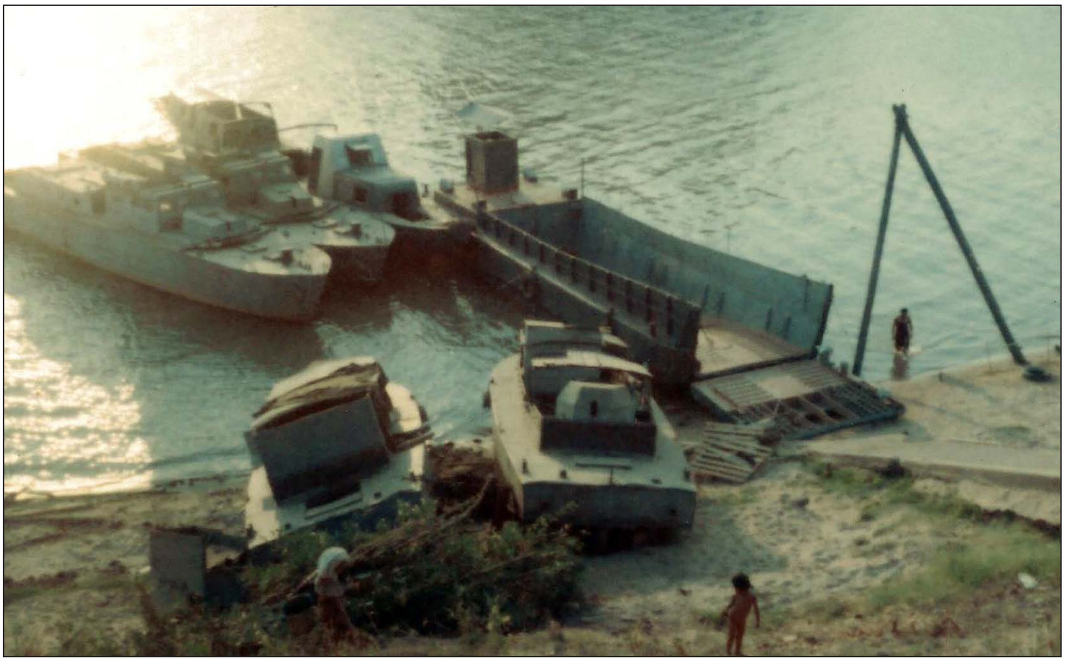
Although these US vessels failed to materialise that year, the PEO did start providing spare parts to the MRL. Moreover, in 1959 a PEO instructor team led by a US Navy Reserve officer arrived in Chinaimo to teach a course at the flotilla's repair shop. In addition, the PEO arranged for two Filipino ECCOIL technicians to be assigned to the MRL headquarters.



US Navy attaché Lee Miles (fourth from left) and a US Navy delegation visit the MRL Jungle School at Thakhek, 1971. Colonel Chao Sinthanavong Kindavong, the MRL commander, is fifth from left. Captain Sorasak Chounramany, far right, was head of the Jungle School. (Photo courtesy Lee Miles)



A FOM 11 at the Thakhek ferry landing, 1973. As with most FOM 11s in MRL service, the rear machinegun turret has been replaced with a raised platform atop of which is a 75mm recoilless rifle. A .30-calibre machine gun is on the rear starboard side and an M18 57mm recoilless rifle rests on the roof. (Photo © David Jenkins, used with permission)



The MRL detachment in Pakse during the dry season of 1968. Visible are a pair of beached FOM 11s without weapons, an LCM landing craft, and a pair of Privat gunboats with the machine guns removed from their front turrets. (Photo courtesy Jim Dunn)

An MRL sailor mans a 75mm recoilless rifle atop a FOM 11 while docked at Ban Houei Sai, 1967. He wears standard FAR fatigues and a FAR cap badge. (Photo © David Jenkins, used with permission)

In June 1960, the Mekong water levels were sufficiently high for the PEO to attempt to bring in the landing ships via Cambodia. Escorted up the Mekong by men from US Naval Beach Group 1 and Underwater Demolition Team 12, five LCM-6s and five LCVPs were successfully delivered to Pakse on 12 July.

The very next month, Kong Le conducted his coup d'état. This literally split the MRL, with Sinthanavong making his way down to Phoumi Nosavan's camp in Savannakhet during September. In Vientiane, meantime, pro-Kong Le members of the flotilla seized control over five Privats and 13 of the FOMs. With the majority of the gunboats in Kong Le's hands, he sent two of the Privats in mid-November as a show of force near Paksane.

By that time, Phoumi had already brought the PEO-supplied landing craft from Pakse up to Savannakhet. During November, they onloaded troops and, with four Privats and two FOM 11s as escorts, slowly headed up the Mekong to conduct the long-awaited counter-coup against Vientiane. En route, there was a 30 November skirmish at Ban Sot, a riverside town 17 kilometres south of the Nam Kading River. In the first loss of a MRL vessel in combat, one of the pro-Kong Le Privats was sent to the bottom. Several further clashes over the first week of December resulted in the loss of another pro-Kong Le Privat near Vientiane.

On the afternoon of 13 December, four pro-Phoumi Privats closed in on the capital from the southeast – only to be driven off by artillery fire. The next day, the pro-Phoumi armada again came abreast of the capital and on two occasions fired volleys of mortars. The day after that, they made two more forays close enough to pelt the town with heavy-weapons fire.

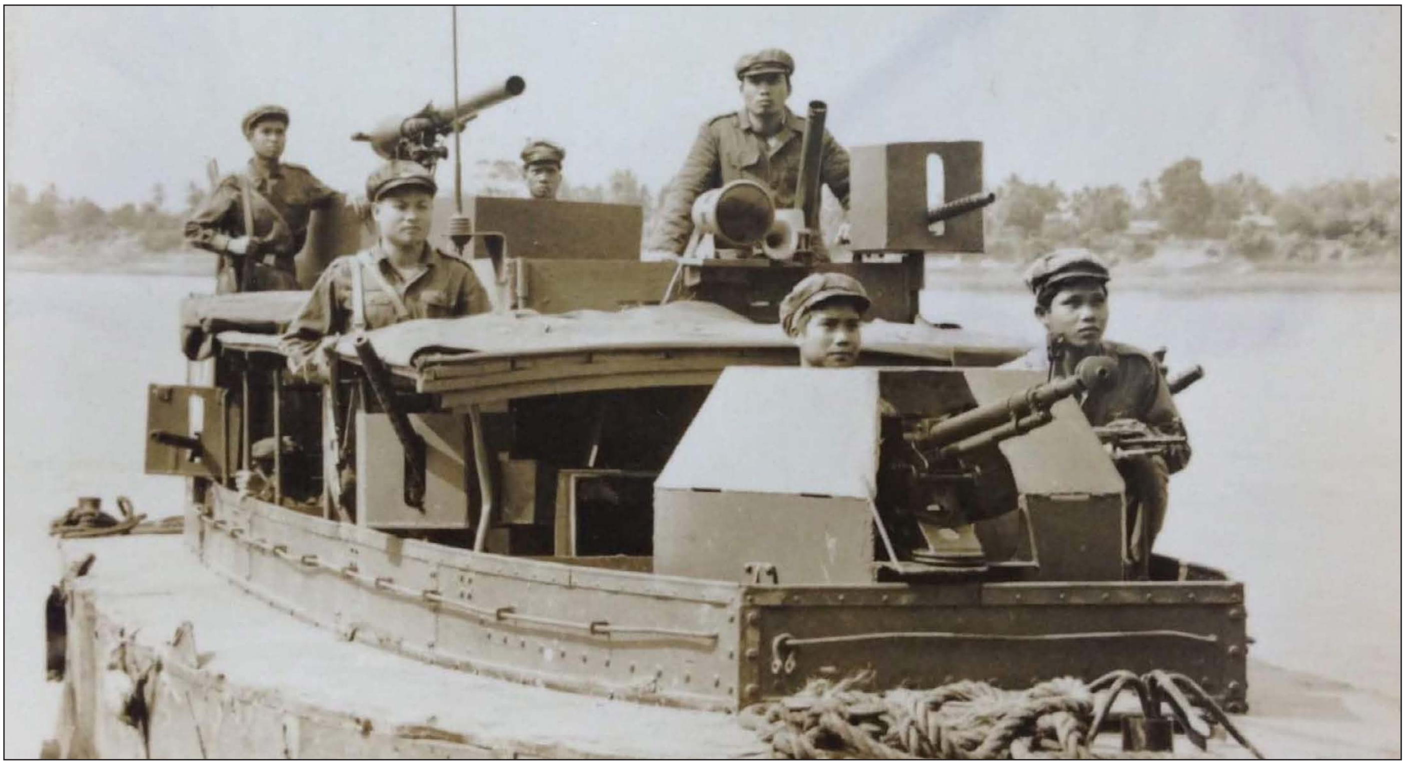
By month's end, the MRL reconsolidated under Phoumi's control. Handing out spoils to his sycophants, command of the flotilla was given to Lieutenant Colonel Mok Kouvongsavanh; not by coincidence, Mok was the brother-in-law of Major General Bounleut Sanichanh, Phoumi's new armed forces commander.

During Mok's tenure spanning the next four years, the flotilla was largely static. It was a low priority for the US military assistance group, which did little other than replace all of the Renault engines in the FOMs with Gray Marines.

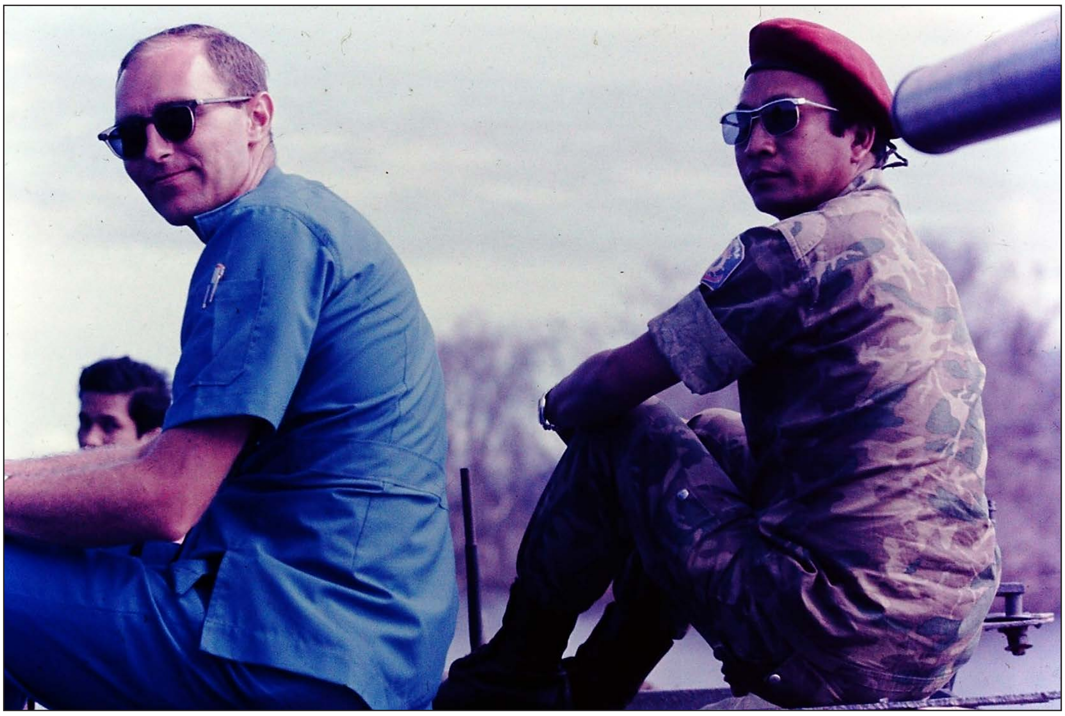
In April 1964, following a failed coup which saw General Bounleut lose the top job, his brother-in-law Mok was booted from the MRL. Replacing him, again, was Chao Sinthanavong Kindavong, by now sporting the rank of lieutenant colonel. From that time until the end of the decade, the flotilla participated in only a single combat operation. This came about in February 1968, when a convoy of landing craft was sent north from Luang Prabang in an effort to reposition forces after the debacle at Nambac. In the course of this movement one of the LCM-6s was sunk in a riverside ambush, resulting in the loss of five sailors.

During this period, the MRL received foreign assistance from a number of sources. The French military mission continued to post advisors at the MRL headquarters at Chinaimo, as well as offer training slots in France. Other training courses were offered by South Vietnam. On-the-job training was accepted from the Royal Thai Navy.

As for the US, they provided stateside training in such topics as logistics and cartography. The US also agreed to fund the establishment of an MRL Jungle School at Thakhek in 1970. This school offered courses for MRL students in basic infantry and patrolling techniques. Graduation exercises had them assault



One of three heavily-armed FOM 11s kept in service by the Pathet Lao after 1975. From its MRL days, it retains the recoilless rifle in the back, .30-calibre M1919 Browning on a central roof mount, and another .30-calibre M1919 Browning on the rear starboard side. The Pathet Lao added a second .30 M1919 Browning on the starboard side and replaced its .50-calibre M2 Browning in the front turret with a Soviet DShK 12.7mm machine gun. (Photo courtesy Martin Rathie Collection/Khaosan Pathet Lao Photo Archive Conservation Project)



Captain Lee Miles, the US Navy attaché accredited to Laos but based in Thailand, sits atop a FOM 11 on the Mekong in late 1970. On the right is Colonel Souk Dary, the deputy MRL commander. Souk wears heavily faded ERDL camouflage, an MRL badge on his left shoulder, and a red beret with standard FAR badge. (Photo courtesy Lee Miles)

beaches from landing craft, though these tactics were never used in actual operations.

What no country agreed to provide was new hardware. A 1971 US Navy assessment of the flotilla included a recommendation that four patrol boats be handed over, but these were never forthcoming. Meantime, attrition was taking a heavy toll. By 1970, all of the Privats were out of commission and many of the landing craft were down for repairs.

Rather than combat operations, the MRL more often found itself saddled with ceremonial duties. Taking a page from the Royal Thai Navy, the MRL was tasked with augmenting the Royal Guard. When the Lao king was in residence at his palace, eight MRL members were split among the palace's four entrances. When the King ventured around the kingdom, 31 guards from the MRL were among his bodyguard detail.

In one final combat mission – only the third in its history – the MRL in November 1972 was called to participate in the defence of Thakhek. Several FOM 11 gunboats from Savannakhet promptly arrived near Thakhek and provided heavy-weapons fire to support a FAR counter-offensive.

For the final three years of the kingdom, Colonel Sinthanavong's flotilla was largely inactive apart from occasionally escorting supply convoys. In the second half of 1975, the prince was sacked and bundled off to a re-education camp in Sam Neua. What little that was operable in the MRL was seized by the Pathet Lao. In a tribute to the longevity of the FOM 11, these remained in use with the Lao People's Armed Forces through the end of that decade, albeit with a Soviet DShK 12.7mm machinegun fitted to the front turret.

SOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Published works that were helpful include *MAP Aid to Laos 1959-1972* (Checo Report, 25 June 1973), *The Royal Laotian Air Force 1954-1970* (Checo Report), and *RLAF Ad Hoc Committee Report* (DepChief JUSMAG, March 1975).

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The author of nearly twenty books about Asian military history and intelligence operations, Conboy's most recent title The Cambodian Wars has been called "riveting and brilliantly researched." Conboy, a graduate of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and of Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies, was also a visiting fellow at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. He has lived in Indonesia since 1992 and this is his fourth book for Helion's @War series.